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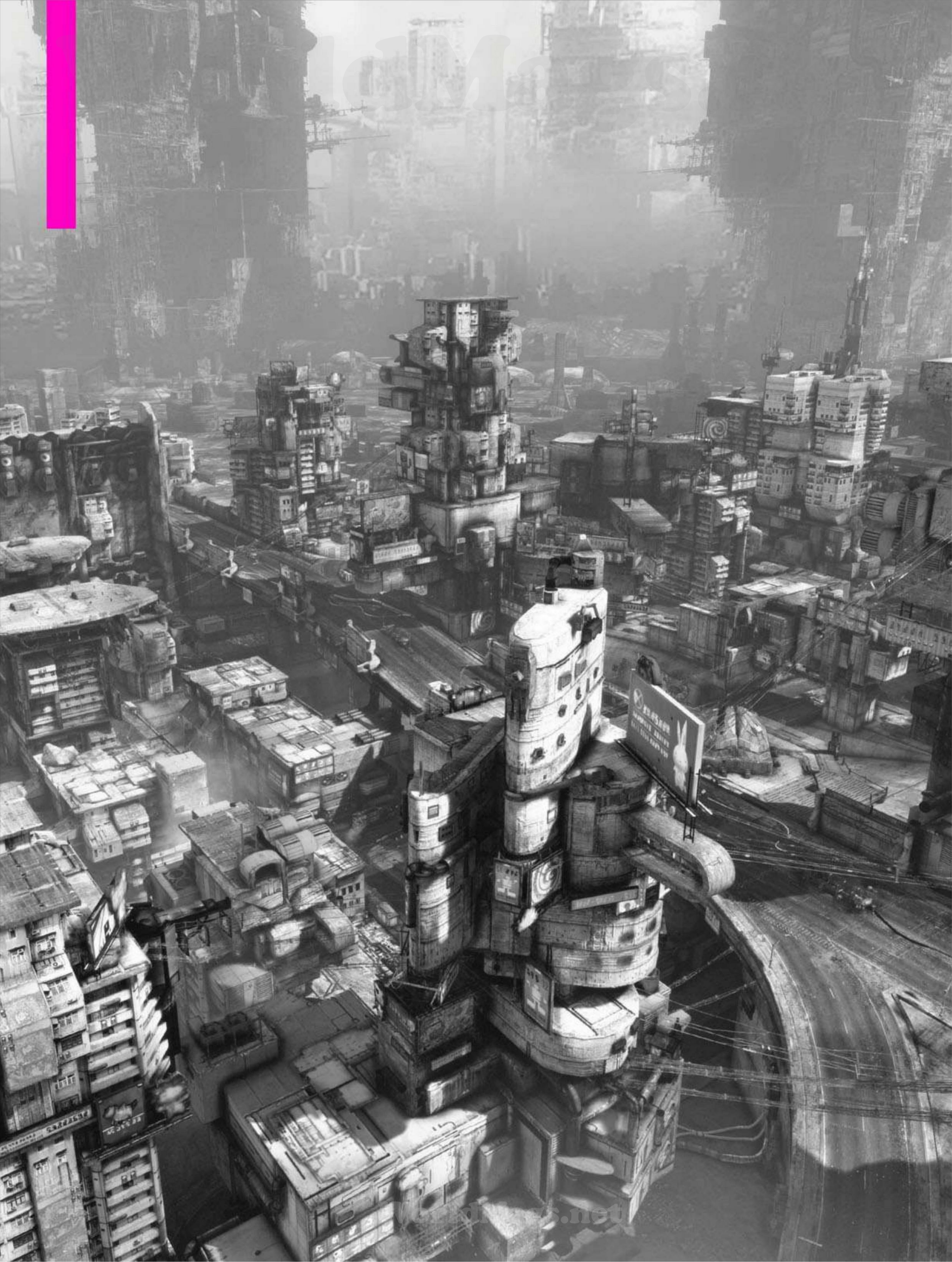
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HAWKEN

The mech genre lies rusting and obsolete, but an indie studio sees the chance for a revival. On p42, we talk to the creators of *Hawken*, the VC-funded PC shooter that aims to give heavy metal back its thunder

THE STORY BEHIND THE FREE MECH FPS THAT REBOOTS THE GENRE

#246
NOVEMBER 2012



We want to be free to do what we want to do



This issue, we explore three stories of independence. We don't mean the kind of developers who live up to the accepted image of the term 'indie' – these studios work on huge projects and employ many staff. But they're no less squarely focused on their own ideas and visions.

The first story is about a studio making its first game. Adhesive Games, knowing the power of a good video, presented *Hawken* to the world early last year, demonstrating its atmospheric world design and fast-paced mech play. It attracted so much attention that the studio ended up with venture capital funding, bringing with it a free-to-play business plan and a transmedia publishing strategy. But Adhesive has ensured its staff are safely cocooned away from a structure that many might find smothering. "It still feels like an indie project," claims creative director **Khang Le**.

The second story is about a studio with five games under its belt. Platinum Games is now free from a major publishing deal with Sega that was underscored by the proviso the studio would enjoy creative freedom. The relationship birthed *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish*, and even its less critically successful games, such as *MadWorld*, are struck through with unforgettably bold inspiration. "If we [retain our independence] while becoming stronger, we'll be able to eliminate a lot of the things we don't want to do," executive director **Atsushi Inaba** tells us.

If there's anything other than scale that differentiates these two developers and the idea of the 'indie', it's that they demonstrate the price of autonomy. Working with companies who would try to control them, they've had to invest much energy into ensuring they can maintain their creative freedom. But there's a third story of independence this issue that illustrates there is another way: one concerning the spiritedly individualistic Media Molecule, which sold itself to Sony. "Taking decisions off our plate is great," says studio director **Siobhan Reddy**. "When we have constraints, we're really good at going wild within those constraints."



games





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KNOW

GAMING WORLD INSIGHT, INTERROGATION AND INFORMATION



WLEDGE

After a strong launch followed by a sparse release schedule, Vita is preparing for a second wave of content, with games such as *Tearaway* and *Killzone: Mercenary* (1) being readied for release. We evaluate the handheld's early life and its future prospects on p10. Continuing to look ahead, we tell the story of the establishment of Rome's first videogame museum, Vigamus (2), on p14. Then we consider the latest photographic additions to Stanford University Library's videogame archive (3) on p16, and explain why this expansive collection is unrivalled in its field. Meanwhile, on p18, we talk to the creators of the forthcoming *Incredipede* (4), who made the quirky and sumptuously drawn puzzle game while travelling the world, visiting countries like Thailand, Malta, and Greece, hopping from one Internet connection to the next. Closer to home, we look at the growing lineup for this year's ExPlay festival (5) on p20, which is moving to picturesque Bath, the home of **Edge**, for its second year. Rounding out Knowledge this month, we invite *Deus Ex* creator Warren Spector (6), Ubisoft's Alex Hutchinson, and *Spec Ops: The Line* lead designer Cory Davis to offer their opinions on industry matters in Soundbytes on p22. Finally, author and Fast Show star Charlie Higson (7) shares his passion for *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* with us in My Favourite Game on p24.



www.bit.ly/lM3xla
Up-to-the-minute game news and views



With its touchscreen, dual sticks and rear touchpad, Vita has control inputs that can be tailored for any kind of gaming

Vita: fighting for life?

After almost a year, has Sony's handheld-of-all-trades managed to distinguish itself?

The tireless next-gen rumour mill means it's easy to forget that the past year has seen new hardware from one of the big three manufacturers. Vita, Sony's multifunctional powerhouse of a handheld, is fast approaching its first birthday, having been launched in Japan on December 17, 2011, and in most other territories back in February.

The lack of buzz around Vita is telling, and hardly surprising after an E3 at which it was practically invisible. And yet initial signs were positive: it slightly outperformed the western launch of 3DS, with SCE president Andrew House apparently "thrilled" by early sales. Fast forward, though, and "acceptable" is how SCEA CEO Jack Tretton described the situation in early August. Ten days later, Sony confirmed the system had sold a meagre 2.2 million units worldwide from launch to June 30 this year, having reached 1.8 million by the end of March. Just 400,000 sales of new hardware in three months is a dismal return by any standard – especially given a million units of the seven-year-old PSP were sold in the same period.

Price hasn't helped. Asking around £230 and £280 for Wi-Fi and Wi-Fi+3G Vita models respectively would seem steep in a healthy economic climate. While online and supermarket competition has ensured more attractive pricing, the continuing strength of the yen has kept Vita out of reach of much of its intended audience. A global price cut gave 3DS the shot in the arm it needed, but assuming Vita is true to its PlayStation roots, Sony is already selling it at a loss. Even if a cut does come, Sony's insistence on expensive proprietary memory cards is a further disincentive.

A £250 handheld is a tough sell at the best of times, then, and Sony not only has to contend with rough economic waters, but the fact that so many people already carry a high-powered gaming device everywhere





ABOVE **SCEE CEO and president Jim Ryan on stage for Sony at Gamescom. He covered everything from Cross-Play to PS Mobile and the big-hitting Christmas releases we can expect**

they go. In Apple's most recent fiscal quarter, it sold some 26 million iPhones. That's 400,000 units sold every 33 hours or so.

At least Sony seems keenly aware of the threat posed by iOS and Android gaming, in contrast to Nintendo's senior management. Sadly, Sony's bid to ensure feature parity with tablets and smartphones has had mixed results. Basic apps for Facebook, Twitter and Foursquare hardly cast Vita in a flattering light, while the location-based Near remains in need of an overhaul, or at the very least a decent tutorial.

No one bought a Vita for Twitter, of course. Sadly, one of the broadest launch line-ups in videogame history was followed by a barren spell, with Sony Japan's *Gravity Rush* the only notable release in months until *Sound Shapes* arrived in August.

The obvious need for new games made Vita's near total absence from Sony's E3 conference all the more galling. The company was quick to respond to the tide of negative feeling with an assurance that Vita was most definitely present, with 25 playable games on the show floor. But it wasn't until August's Gamescom that we saw clear signs that Sony recognises Vita is in severe danger of being stuck with the same 'no games' label that PS3 took so long to shake off.

Admittedly, many of the titles shown off by SCEE president Jim Ryan on stage in Cologne did little to dispel the notion that Vita was following in PSP's footsteps – in the west, at least – sporting a software lineup dominated by spin-offs of established franchises. But Media Molecule's *Tearaway*, a papercraft adventure using not only traditional controls but smartphone-like touch and tilt, was also the perfect counterpoint to the likes of *Call Of Duty: Black Ops Declassified*. Support for PlayStation Plus, the subscription service that has come on leaps and bounds of late, will also help – and, of course, do much to drive new subscription revenue.

Vita firmware updates to date have focused on bug fixes and minor UI tweaks, but again the past few months have suggested Sony is learning from its mistakes. The most recent update, released in August, added support for PSOne games – supported by a cannily timed retro sale on PlayStation Store – and introduced Cross-Controller, allowing Vita owners to use the system as a PS3 controller. More is in the works: Cross-Buy, where buying a PS3 game gives access to a download of the Vita version, is already used by the downloadable *MotorStorm RC* and *Sound Shapes*, but is soon to be expanded to firstparty retail releases. Meanwhile, Cross-Play will enable cross-platform multiplayer between PS3 and Vita, and the self-explanatory Cross-Save has already been used in *Metal Gear Solid HD Collection*, although there it goes by the Kojima-coined name 'transfarring'.

Sony's track record on PS3 suggests that it would do well to more proactively court indie developers

An improved feature set, though, will only do so much for Vita's fortunes, and there will surely be recognition in the boardrooms and corner offices of Sony's Tokyo HQ that games are the priority. While 3DS's price cut helped, it was the late-2011 triumvirate of *Super Mario 3D Land*, *Mario Kart 7*, and, in Japan, *Monster Hunter Tri G* that really revived the ailing handheld. You need only glance at the cast of Sony's *Smash Bros*-style fighting game, *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale*, to see that the company's IP portfolio pales in comparison to Nintendo's, and its Kyoto rival has already secured *Monster Hunter 4* for 3DS. In Japan, PSP has become the de facto home for JRPGS, and its enduring popularity is also holding Vita back from success, its huge installed base keeping Japanese developers in its thrall.

Western studios, however, are rather keener on the system, and those willing to talk tend to back up Sony's claim that Vita is its most developer-friendly hardware yet. Rudolf Kremers, developer of the indie game *Eufloria*, says Vita is "fantastic", adding that it could become the new home for the struggling middle tier of games we looked at in **E**245. Sony's track record on PS3 – and even on Vita with the excellent *Sound Shapes* – suggests that it would do well to more proactively court independent developers to bolster Vita's software lineup. This seems



TEARAWAY

Publisher SCE **Developer** Media Molecule **Release** TBA
Media Molecule looks determined to blow the potential of Vita wide open with its adventure game about an envelope-headed messenger. The game invites you to become a part of its papery world by punching holes in it with the rear touchpad and blowing into the mic, as well as via countless other context-specific tricks the developer has in store. *Tearaway*'s first glimpses promise a title as varied as it is vibrant, and it comes from one of the UK's most courageous developers (see p122).

KILLZONE: MERCENARY

Publisher SCE **Developer** Guerrilla Games **Release** TBA
From the engine that brought us *Killzone 3*, *Mercenary* has you take on the role of a gun for hire, hopping between ISA and Helghast loyalties as you kill on command for money. The visuals certainly take their cue from Guerrilla's third console entry, all bold reds and cool cyan. Whether the touchscreen aspects of the title – swiping to perform context-specific actions – can make a more convincing case than *Resistance: Burning Skies* has yet to be proved.



ASSASSIN'S CREED III: LIBERATION

Publisher Ubisoft **Developer** in-house **Release** October 30 (US), 31 (UK)
This spin-off breaks away from the story of Desmond Miles, with the series' first female lead, Aveline De Grandpré, adding a French-African flavour to the role. As with *Black Ops: Declassified*, there's some disappointment that the publisher isn't rolling out its A-team for this Vita incarnation of the series, but *Liberation* at least looks to be boldly capturing, and toying with, the world of its big brother.



CALL OF DUTY BLACK OPS: DECLASSIFIED

Publisher Activision **Developer** Nihilistic Software **Release** November
Glimpses so far suggest a rough-around-the-edges imitation of *COD*, rather than a worthy representation of its thrills and gore, and the release date doesn't bode well for enough time to smooth things over either. A meagre four-versus-four multiplayer offering doesn't raise hopes either, but there's still a chance here for Nihilistic to improve on the shaky foundations of its critically panned *Resistance: Burning Skies*.

especially true with the impending launch of PlayStation Mobile, a cross-platform SDK that will enable devs to compile not just for Vita, but a range of Android-powered smartphones and tablets as well with no additional development work required.

Sony's insistence that it is satisfied with Vita's paltry sales is telling, and reflects either a company in denial or one that knows the system's best years are to come. Jim Ryan saying that Cross-Play and the like will probably be limited to firstparty releases for the time being, because "PS Vita is a more PC-based environment, whereas the PS3 is more bespoke" speaks volumes. Sony is rumoured to be basing its PlayStation 4 on PC architecture, and while Vita and PS3 play together nicely enough at the moment, it's tempting to believe that Vita was designed with the next-gen console in mind.

It remains a device bursting with potential, even if that potential has thus far largely gone unexplored. Certainly, existing Vita owners seem delighted with the hardware, but much remains to be done to convince the sceptical. With a price cut unlikely and trying to ride the coat tails of smartphone success inadvisable, Sony needs to emphasise what Vita does better than a phone. In short, it needs to back up the system's formidable horsepower and traditional controls with a carefully curated library of mechanically deep games; titles that put all those virtual D-pad-stricken iOS nightmares in the shade. ■



Roman renaissance

How an Italian game journalist's crusade to bring game history to the masses paid off

Think it can be difficult getting funding for a videogame project? Consider this: **Marco Accordi Rickards**, a game journalist, had to pitch his plan for a videogame museum called Vigamus to Italian politicians who didn't even know what videogames were. "When they heard about videogames, they were just thinking about gambling, betting, poker, slot machines… they were like, 'We don't think it's something that's right for a museum.' We really had to explain that videogames were *Mario*, *Zelda*, *Metal Gear*…"

It was 2008, and Rickards' idea was simple: "The main plan was to have a permanent videogame museum, a centre devoted to research, study and a place for people passionate about games to meet and connect. We started contacting institutions, including the city of Rome – the federal district – to persuade them that videogames had cultural value. It was very difficult."

The local politicians' lack of awareness was reflective of an across-the-board attitude Rickards would encounter for the next two years as he sought to secure a site and funding for his valiant venture; an attitude that dismissed videogames as child's play. "We have problems here recognising the cultural and artistic value of games. In Italy we don't have a very solid industry, as developers; we have a strong market, but that doesn't help very much because people think of videogames just as toys – something you buy, sell, promote, not a cultural industry where you create. That's also why the institutions, the politicians, universities, were so reluctant to embrace Vigamus."

Rickards was fighting his battle for recognition in the classroom, too, lecturing in videogame history at the University of Rome and evangelising to students who often turned up for what they thought might be an easy ride, but he says the topic ended up proving more inspirational and relevant than they might initially have assumed. "The good, encouraging thing is that, after a semester, many [students] would come back and say it was a nice surprise to discover the cultural themes, the history and real story behind games. It's about making people conscious gamers, making them aware of what's behind this art-form and changing their outlook."

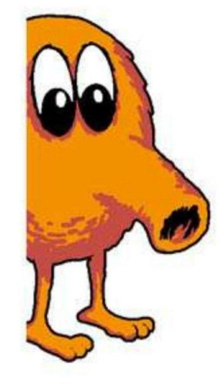


Marco Accordi Rickards has locked horns with officials and institutions unaware of gaming's cultural importance

Perseverance finally paid off. Rickards' participation in the Italian Videogame Developers Conference meant he could use his contacts and reputation to garner enough enthusiasm and gain the right attention to finally break the paymasters' backs and raid their wallets. Vigamus was born, granted a 1,000 square metre site at a reduced rate courtesy of the city of Rome, and backed by a variety of partners.

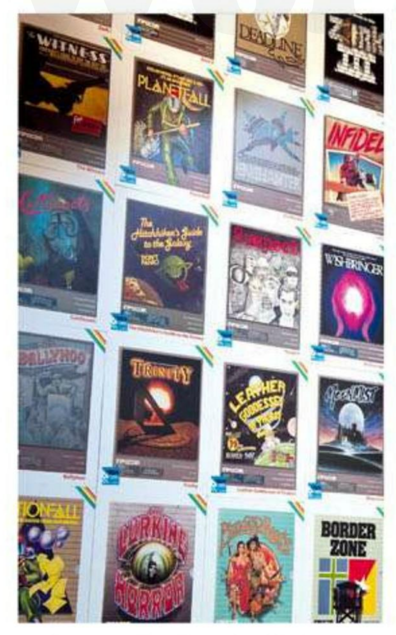
"We contacted institutions to persuade them that videogames had cultural value. It was very difficult"

That was just the start of the hard work: "[The location] was a mess," Rickards says bluntly, "but we are very grateful, without the site we couldn't have made this happen". He and his team wasted no time using their own resources to build the rubble into a chic, modern major attraction. It took two years of renovation work and planning to realise the Vigamus vision as it was conceived in the beginning, but the effort has been worth it for what Rickards believes is a crucial cause to bring games into the spotlight both internationally and at home.



Local and national authorities have ended up embracing Vigamus as it takes its place alongside some of Rome's most famous locales and museums. Need proof of its profile? The Vatican is a short, five-minute stroll up the street. Tickets can be bought for Vigamus from all the sites selling passes to the city's more traditional, established museums, ensuring it a wide reach. "We want to push the cultural value of videogames, to educate those familiar with games and those who aren't," says Rickards. "We think of games as 'interactive multimedia works;' the word 'game' can lead to a misunderstanding nowadays. We want people to understand it's not all encapsulated in that one word, people have to understand that a game has artists and authors behind it who express a vision. We believe gamers should become more conscious of the nature of a game."

It's not just about the consumer and passer-by, however – Rickards sees a broader scope for influence with the project: "We also want to promote activities not just focused on Italy, to make it a central point for cultural and business activities in the field of gaming for the south Mediterranean area. Vigamus can easily host gatherings of developers. Hopefully our structure will be a place where new products can be shown, where we can show the world that there's something interesting happening here in Italy." ■



Text is presented in Italian and English, but Vigamus has much to offer on a purely visual level, from classic art and promo material to hardware



The collection is sure to expand as Vigamus develops, but its opening spread of game history is broad and considered









From the boxart to the paint on the walls, Vigamus is colourful and stimulating, certain to attract anyone looking for a change of pace and style from Rome's traditional museums



DYNAMIC DUO

Vigamus' pair of historic exhibits joined by devs



When it opens on October 20, Vigamus will offer visitors two permanent exhibitions and one temporary (with text in Italian and English). The first permanent one is an in-depth history of one of videogames' defining eras, beginning with *Tennis For Two* and stretching to 1985, while the second focuses on hardware. For the temporary slot, Vigamus has enlisted one of Italy's biggest developers, Milestone, to use the site both as a retrospective for its work – with concept art and sketches from its development history – and to host the launch of its multiplatform rally title *WRC3*.



BLASTS FROM THE PAST

California's Stanford University has snapped up a collection of retro arcade photographs

Space Invaders. Flares. Mullets. Deep concentration and hours wiled away with unblinking eyes. Stanford University Libraries' latest acquisition to its archive of rare photographs is a collection of glorious black-and-white videogame nostalgia. Captured by the lens of award-winning photographer Ira Nowinski between 1980 and 1981, the photographs show a defining era in American arcade game culture, fashion and history.

They join the largest collection of videogame paraphernalia in the world. While the library's primary focus is archiving games released since the early '90s (complete with consoles to play them on), the collection dates back to the '70s, and also includes treasures such as Richard Bartle's notes relating to the development of the first multi-user dungeon at the University Of Essex.

With over 20,000 games in the collection, and a related project attempting to archive documentation of virtual worlds, few institutions rival Stanford in its commitment. ■

The full Nowinski arcade collection consists of approximately 650 35mm images, with only some, such as this striking fellow playing *Centipede*, having been digitised


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20/11 LONDON BFI Southbank
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Incredipede is a puzzle game in which you create a creature named Quozzle, who can grow new arms and legs at your will to clear various obstacles

FAST TRAVEL

The pair who make indie games while travelling the world

Playing games offers the perk of low-cost virtual tourism; *Assassin's Creed II*, for example, invites us to poke around the alleys of Renaissance-era Florence, or take in the Basilica di San Marco. But for indie game designers Sarah and **Colin Northway**, it's been the making of games that's enabled them to indulge their travel impulse for real.

The success of 2008 Flash game *Fantastic Contraption* enabled the couple, originally from British Columbia, Canada, to jettison all material possessions (bar their Alienware M11x laptops) and move abroad. Living in each new country for a month or two at a time helps keep travel costs down. To date, they've set up camp in Thailand, Malta, Greece, Turkey, the Philippines, and Scotland, to name just a few.

They're able to settle anywhere with Internet access, but the couple's travels aren't just a fun distraction. The constant change of scenery and culture provides an endless source of inspiration, as evidenced by their latest project, *Incredipede*.

"*Incredipede* wouldn't exist if it weren't for Honduras," explains Colin. "We lived in a little house in the middle of nowhere out over the water. We had to kayak to get groceries and bought fish from fishermen right out of their boats as they passed by. Instead of spending an afternoon at a coffee shop talking about ludo-narrative, I would spend it following trails of leafcutter ants. There was so much life all around us all the time, and it was so varied that *Incredipede* had to happen." ■



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Southern comfort

The second ExPlay conference is coming to the historic city of Bath, continuing its mission to put the UK gaming scene on the map



START YOUR GAME ENGINES
This year's ExPlay game jam takes place across two locations – the Science Museum in London and The Pervasive Media Studios in Bristol – with a live video feed connecting the two tribes of budding developers. The theme will be revealed by biomedical scientists from The Wellcome Trust on October 5, and the winning project will be showcased at the conference in Bath.

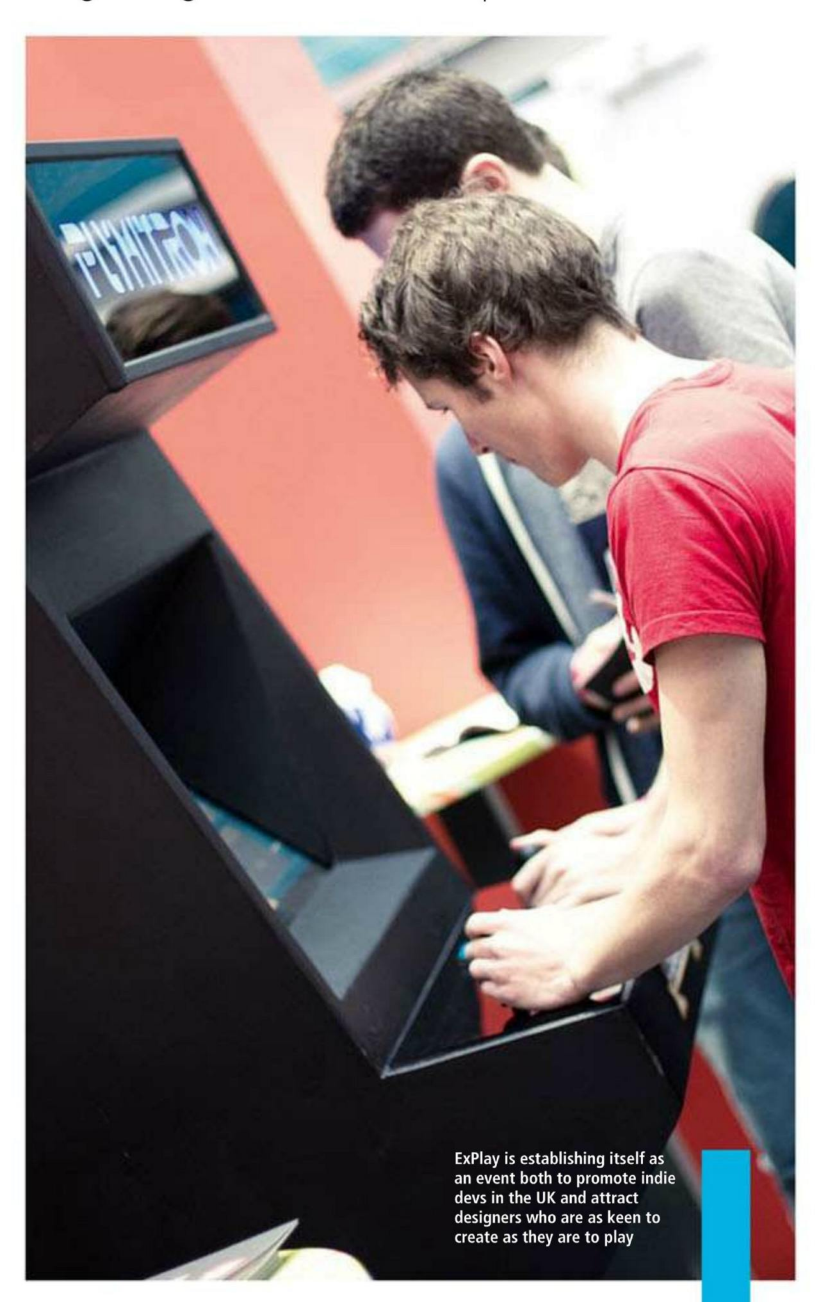
With a packed line-up of sessions from key industry figures and a victory showcase for a 24-hour game jam, gaming festival ExPlay has all the headline features you'd expect. Less expected, though, is the choice of location: Bath, England. The famous World Heritage City will host ExPlay from October 31 to November 2, and feature showcases from exhibitors that festival director **Korash Sanjideh** believes will "raise the profile of the indie games industry across the UK".

Opening with a keynote from UKIE CEO Jo Twist, speakers will cover topics spanning game journalism and PR (courtesy of **Edge** contributor Keith Stuart) and a panel on the influence of Japanese gaming, with confirmed appearances from Zen United's Geraint Evans and Marvelous AQL's Harry Holmwood. The **Edge** team will also be presenting a dedicated panel at the event.

Meanwhile, aspiring developers will enjoy game creation course exhibitions from south-west England's universities, with crucial insight coming from Alex Ryley of start-up Mutant Labs, who set up his studio after a game-focused degree. Other sessions will feature a spectrum of developers, including *CSR Racing* maker Boss Alien, London indie Mediatonic and *Total War* team The Creative Assembly.

On November 1, ExPlay will also usher in the inaugural TIGA Games Industry Awards, which aim to recognise home-grown talent, and TIGA CEO Richard Wilson will be on hand to open the ceremony at Bath's Assembly Rooms.

For a full schedule and more information on booking a place at this year's ExPlay, visit www.explay.co.uk. To book your place at the TIGA awards and find out more about the categories, head to awards.tiga.org. ■



ExPlay is establishing itself as an event both to promote indie devs in the UK and attract designers who are as keen to create as they are to play



Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

"Can you imagine what games we would have if John Carmack decided he wanted to create a believable character as opposed to a believable gun? **I mean, oh my God!** Those guys are way smarter than I am. I don't know how to solve the problem, but they could figure it out."

Warren Spector flatters and insults his fellow developer in one fell swoop

"I think there's a subtle racism in the business, especially on the journalists' side, where Japanese developers are forgiven for doing what they do. I think it's condescending to do this."

Assassin's Creed III creative director **Alex Hutchinson** on eastern bias

"The multiplayer game's tone is entirely different, the game mechanics were raped to make it happen, and it was a waste of money. **No one is playing it."**

Spec Ops lead designer **Cory Davis** sticks it to 2K for tacked-on multiplayer

"I do remember my first guitar… I swapped it for my pal Matt Johns' Sega Mega Drive."

The Darkness's **Justin Hawkins** on trading in his career for games

ARCADE WATCH

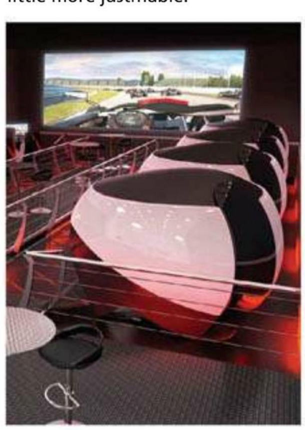
Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Hardware Motion Simulation TL1
Manufacturer Motion Simulation Limited

A real driving simulator in every sense, the TL1 blurs the line between the virtual and real worlds inside its sleek, compact pod. Designed for both home and public use, the TL1 outwardly looks like a giant-sized Apple product, but contains a wraparound 180 degree three-piece screen that clocks in at two metres in width. Three separate projectors deliver the seamless image, ensuring blind spots are never a problem. The striking, pin-sharp display (made up of a quite staggering 7 million pixels) is just one piece of the TL1 experience, however, with the force-feedback of the cockpit, reverberating through pedals, stick and wheel, making you feel every bump and bounce as you steer your way around the track.

Currently demoed as a racing sim, it's the potential beyond the driving genre that makes this hardware exciting. An FPS built with the TL1 in mind is a distinct possibility, one hinted at by press material and one that could make the £11,500 starting price for the full simulator model seem that little more justifiable.





My favourite game Charlie Higson

The comedian and author discusses Bond, zombies, and being worse at Call Of Duty than his teenage son

You may recognise **Charlie Higson** from UK comedy series The Fast Show, on which he was a principal writer and performer, playing characters such as Swiss Toni. Teenagers, meanwhile, will know him as the author of Young Bond, which follows 007's Eton days, and zombie-horror series The Enemy. Here, he talks about what games and books can offer today's youth, why aping films in games doesn't work and the zenith of his favourite series.

FAST ENEMY
Former lead singer in punk-funk band The Higsons, Charlie Higson is perhaps best known to those under 30 for his series of Young Bond and The Enemy novels, and by those nearing 35 for being a TV sketch comedian. He has been described by Time Out as "The missing link between Dick Emery and Bret Easton Ellis," which is nice.



You've said that books for young adults and children have to give the same 'kick' as games. What did you mean?
Books and games do very different things, but if you get it right they can be equally engrossing. The kick you get from games is your direct involvement and control. I don't like games that try to be films, or those that have interminable cutscenes. I like games you can actually play and give you different ways to play – ones you can keep going back to.

Equally, I don't think films and books should try to ape games, because if you're watching a film that looks like a videogame you'd rather be playing the game. What books give you that games can't is to get inside the characters, and get you much more involved in a story. In games, I find really heavy stories get in the way of the game itself.

Games are incredibly exciting, and because of the challenge aspect and the fact that you're often playing against people – whether the game's designer or other players – there's that incredible obsessiveness, compulsiveness and that urge to have one more go to complete it. There were no games when I grew up until I was a teenager, so books didn't have to compete so hard for my time. Particularly for boys: if I say not to play a game for a bit and read this instead, you've got to make it exciting.

You have a zombie book series. Are games beginning to inform the kinds of settings and themes in books?
Not so much, no. Zombies, for me, go back to films: Night Of The Living Dead and George Romero. There are zombies in games and zombies in books, and books go wrong if they try to ape game experiences, trying to be exactly like playing a videogame, because all you'll want to do is play a videogame. They've got to give something different, but for boys it's action and adventure – explosions, chases, danger, death and gore [laughs].

"Books and games do very different things, but if you get it right they can be equally engrossing"

You aren't so sure about story-heavy games, but the likes of *Uncharted* are incredibly popular…
My eldest son plays *FIFA* all the time, and every time he goes back to it it's going to be different. I play online, and every time you play it's different because you're playing against real people. I think that's the real thing you get in games: the whole online thing, interacting with real people, so it's always different. In terms of games straying towards film territory, I think the *GTA* games got the balance pretty well, where there is a story you can follow and reasonably entertaining cutscenes, but you can go off-piste and drive away. And I particularly liked the way it used radio stations, where you've got this whole second story going on that you can dip in and out of. I think that's really clever, and something you couldn't do anywhere else. That's what games have to do, to say, 'Only we can do this.'

So what's your favourite game?
Call Of Duty is my favourite. But as I'm playing on a Mac, I can only play the first *Modern Warfare*. Which is great, and I don't need anything more than that. Some people upload maps from later versions of *COD*, but I don't think they've got any better than *Modern Warfare*. I'd like to play *Call Of Duty 2*, which I played a lot, but it won't play since I've updated my Mac.

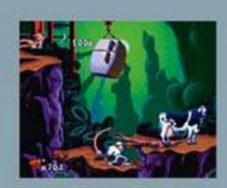
What's so good about *COD*?
It works as a game. I play it online, so it's against real people. It's endless and different every time. Sometimes you play well and sometimes you play crap; sometimes it's frustrating and sometimes you're lost for an hour. That's the joy. You can improve your skills, too, though I've kind of reached my peak. Sometimes you look at these people and think they're cheating, but I see my middle son, who's 17, playing and he can be crouching behind something, pop up, snipe, and be back down in a quarter of a second. I've worked out a way in which I do pretty well, but I'll never be as good as that. ■



In Higson's The Enemy series, adults have become zombie-like creatures, leaving kids to fend for themselves. The fourth book, The Sacrifice, is out now

WEBSITE
Art Of The Arcade
www.bit.ly/OfPzWb

This young website has a noble ambition: to display the artwork behind classic arcade videogames and to celebrate the artists. Created by London-based graphic designer Nick Dart, the collection is a valuable resource for anyone looking to trace the legacy of videogame promotional art, logos and even operator manual design, all presented with an economy that puts the showcased artwork to the fore. One highlight is an Atari T-shirt from 1982 that would make government health departments balk (the slogan reads: "Sun is fun – but I'd rather be playing Atari"). Another is the set of Activision Megamaniacs patches sent in 1980 to players who photographed their high scores at home and posted them to the company. A primitive progenitor of *COD*'s ranking system, perhaps?



VIDEO
Gaming History Source
www.bit.ly/RCv7tD

Beneath our mature bearing and countenance still beats a heart that quickens at the thought of pitting one console against another. So you'll forgive our delight at the emergence of a YouTube channel that's devoted to comparing different ports of the same retro game, from *Street Fighter* to *Mr Do!*, covering every platform on which they appeared. These videos are a fine reminder of just how many expressions of the same game can exist, each one strictly governed by its host hardware, and the delicate art of porting.

WEB GAME
Plan M
www.bit.ly/SqiXe8

The theme of the latest Ludum Dare 24-hour game jam theme was 'evolution', and aptly received entries from the whole evolutionary spectrum of game and visual design. Throngs of platformers paid homage to Amiga and SNES with their visuals and pace, but *Plan M*'s designer, Murray Lewis, took a different route. A point-and-click adventure, it has two typically streetwise cops (one is a ghost, of course) dealing with the fact that everyone's mysteriously turned into monkeys. The artfully crude backdrops and character design supports a script that's snappy and silly enough to win you over ("simianthesiser"). It might even get you into the mood for the apparent resurgence of the form that's coming from the likes of the forthcoming *Double Fine Adventure* and *Broken Sword 5*.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A torrent of doohickies that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**246

TRITTON WARHEAD HEADSET
www.trittonaudio.com

The first 360 headset to use Microsoft's own wireless chip comes with a name that suggests its bulk, but proves comfortable during long sessions. At first, the sound it produces seems a little tinny, but you soon start appreciating its detailed reproduction and meaty bass. Surround headsets have long been a weapon of choice for the multiplayer shooter crowd, and after it's saved you by alerting you to an approaching enemy's footsteps a few times, the £200 price tag starts to feel like a bargain. And don't be put off by its supposed 360 exclusivity – the optical and analogue audio leads can be connected to anything, including PS3.



continue

Gear goggles
Both Valve and Carmack demonstrating their new headset tech? It's time to get very excited

Leaderboard battle
That rare pleasure when all your friends are fighting for rankings

Raspberry buy
Manufacturing capacity increased. Order now!

Cinematic arts
Given *Pandaria*'s intro video, shouldn't Blizzard get into film-making?

quit

Psygnosis closing
The end of one of gaming's most vibrant stories. Condolences to all staff affected

Leaderboard gap
That sinking feeling as you realise you'll never keep up with the pack

Courier promises
Apparently empty, like their black hearts

Never alone
With the pressure to deliver 'services', what future for singleplayer?

TWEETS

Note to indies unable to afford $100 Greenlight fee. Publishers will pay that for you in exchange for IP ownership. It's the future!
Rob Donald @Rob_Donald
Product marketing manager, Warner Bros

Coming soon: Kickstarters to fund Steam Greenlight pitches
Ian Bogost @ibogost
Professor at Georgia Tech; founder, Persuasive Games

Greenlight is really fun! It's like supporting hard-working, deserving indie developers *without having to spend any money*. Perfect!
Dan Marshall @danthat
Founder, Size Five Games

Just noticed that 14,000 people have watched my *Caverns Of Minos* gameplay video. Jesus if you'd all just BUY THE GAME I'd be a bit happier.
Jeff Minter @llamasoft_ox
Founder, Llamasoft





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DISPATCHES
NOVEMBER

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers worry whether Wii U will really work out for Nintendo, chastise us for our all-male editorial team, celebrate the educational potential of *MinecraftEdu*, and reflect sadly on the demise of the middle-tier game. Then in Perspective, **Steven Poole** considers the unsteady relationship between sports games and their inspirations, **Leigh Alexander** explores the real-life themes that games tend not to express, and a future **Brian Howe** reports from E3 2017 on Hideo Kojima's surprising new direction.



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Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 245

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

Mindcraft

As an English language teacher, the School Of Rocks story in **E**245 concerning *MinecraftEdu* really hit home. While not a *Minecraft* player myself, I can thoroughly appreciate the efforts of Santeri Koivisto and Joel Levin, as well as the support of Mojang, in utilising the creative and social aspects of the *Minecraft* phenomenon to craft a unique teaching and learning tool. The project is a perfect example of how modern-day classrooms can benefit from interactive entertainment – OK, videogames – in ways that traditional educational aids (textbooks, whiteboards, video) simply cannot provide.

The days of blackboards, chalk and even whiteboards are increasingly giving way to the delights of the interactive whiteboard (IWB), at least where school budgets permit. The technology provides a means of allowing students to directly interact with subjects using their hands to manipulate content on the board, which is streamed from a computer. IWBs provide a more interactive context and, importantly, tangibility to the topic being taught. In comparison, *MinecraftEdu* is a fresh and exciting new step in the evolution of technology in the classroom.

The example of the Danish language teacher using *MinecraftEdu* to get students to cooperate, interact and communicate in a foreign language, and for the process to have been highly effective, spoke volumes as to the significance of the project's universal reach across all subjects (but in particular language learning). When teaching a creative writing class to my students, I can envision asking them to build their stories in *Minecraft* and then constructing narratives inspired by their experiences – the context for the activity would be entirely interactive, and best of all, driven cooperatively as a class. This process has the potential to be infinitely more appealing to children (and even adult learners) who feel intimated and uninterested in traditional, more passive, means of lesson delivery.

Importantly, as mentioned in your article, the success of *MinecraftEdu* and similar projects in the educational gaming movement lies in passionate people in education who understand and appreciate the potential of the technology and the project to heighten the classroom experience. This, I feel, at least from a UK perspective, will be a lofty mountain to climb as perceptions of 'gaming' are still largely negatively attached to student academic performance. However, if more educators and parents can be convinced through example (as illustrated at Games Britannia) of how such a learning aid can add value to their child's learning experience, that's more than half the battle won. Were Mojang to throw in a few dozen cardboard heads with each school's order, consider it certain victory.
Kamil Haroon

A lot comes down to teachers' attitudes, but, as you say, the question seems to revolve around how the *MinecraftEdu* team can actively go out to demonstrate its potential. By the way, did you see that *Minecraft*'s now also being used in a United Nations project to encourage youths to take roles in urban planning? Have a 3DS – perhaps there's some instructive potential in *Super Mario 3D Land*.

Gender roles

Shame on you, **Edge**, shame on you. I have been an avid reader and subscriber of yours for the past 15 years, and at the age of 37 can proclaim to have had at least a 32-year-long love affair with all things games- and industry-related.

My life is about to change, with the impending birth of my first child, a daughter, and it was while packing away my games room (PS3, Wii and Dreamcast have at least escaped to the lounge!) to make room for this new addition that I stumbled upon my old issues of Zzap!64 Magazine. A quick and joyful flick through the letters pages showed that, to my surprise, the majority of the letters were commentating on issues that are still prevalent today: too many sequels, the price of games, piracy and a lack of women in the industry?

The lack of women in the industry has now obviously hit a chord with me, and it was with dismay, as I checked p6 of **E**245, that I realised that no women – that's a fat zero – were listed as working in editorial on this great institution. The 'business' side is not much better, either, and I cannot be the only reader that finds this troubling. Is this reflective of the industry that **Edge** operates in, or is **Edge** magazine a last bastion of 'jobs for the boys' with its views unintentionally skewed and unbalanced as a result.

It would seem that, at the least, I need to scratch the position of **Edge** editor – heck, working in **Edge** Towers – off the list of possible outcomes for my new daughter.
Aaron Barber

Well, one of **Edge**'s editors has been female, and we have a female columnist. Do they count? We assure you, for a fine chance of joining our team your daughter need only grow up with a passion for games and writing. One thing's for certain, though: it really is about time that we didn't have to even discuss the lack of women working in the industry – whether journalism or development – any more. Yet, speaking from our perspective, more need to apply for our vacancies.

End of the road

Seeing *New Super Mario Bros 2* play the by-numbers game was a disappointment, made particularly painful considering it's

one of Nintendo's big – and only – releases ahead of the holiday season for its established platforms. It's understandable, of course, with Wii U on the horizon, but I can't help the sense that this Christmas is going to be a particularly quiet one for the original Wii faithful. What of the Wii owner not yet ready, or able, to trade in and pay up for its successor? *Skyward Sword* may have been the system's sublime swan song, but in my opinion, a swan song should come at the bitter end, not a year in advance.

The build-up to and excitement surrounding the tidal wave of winter releases – the *Call Of Duty* and *Assassin's Creed* fever – is such an integral part of the season, and an integral chunk of the media's drive, that it's difficult to muster much enthusiasm as a Nintendo Wii die-hard staring at a relatively blank release slate and a shelf of year-old-plus titles. If Wii had catered more to the demands of developers I might be able to, like many friends, slap a pre-order down on *Black Ops 2* this winter, rather than go relatively cold turkey.

The optimist in me hopes that Wii U really will address the lack of thirdparty support for the company's platforms and bring Nintendo's home console architecture and capability bang up to date, so that developers can easily plop IP on to the system alongside Sony's and Microsoft's. It's something Nintendo consoles have arguably suffered for since the Nintendo 64 – even when it was ahead of the pack technically, it was seemingly out of step with the demands of developers hoping to quickly port their titles for the Nintendo fans. It's both the gift and curse of the company: it's staunchly committed to its own creative vision and path, delivering quality like no other (often at a pace slower than no other – but good things come to those who wait). But this same approach applied to hardware – a stubborn belief in doing things its own way – marginalises fans who need the downtime between firstparty titles filled.

The pessimist in me wonders at the awful timing of Wii U. If the other big two platform holders unveil their new wares at E3 2013 (could Sony really be gunning for 4K resolution gaming? The Cloud? And what new hand-flapping heights might Kinect 2 take us to?) the bar may be reset at the exact moment Nintendo reaches it.
Steve Henney

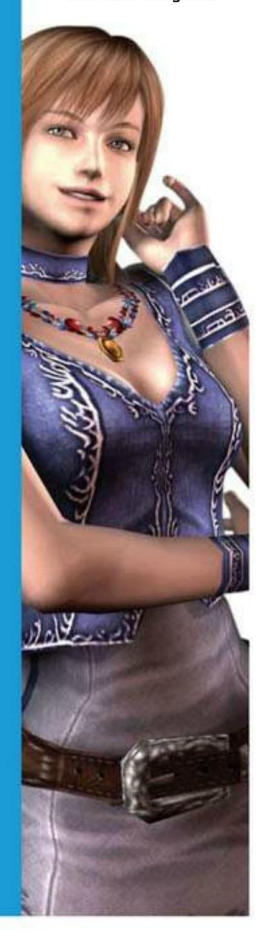
For Nintendo, it's again about the product differentiation that comes from that second handheld screen. Are we convinced? Not yet. But we'll admit that it'd probably only take a demo in which Mario magically pops between TV and GamePad with a cheery whahoo! to sway us. The **Edge** brood's ahead of us, though: it won't stop talking about its plans for *Scribblenauts Unlimited*.

Middle of the road

I was interested to read your recent feature about the decline of 'middle-tier' games (**E**245). I've been worried about exactly the same thing, because I can genuinely say that some of my favourite games have come from this bracket. *Psi-Ops*, *God Hand*, *P.N.03*: I got so much out of them. They took on risky ideas, but felt completely full-featured on their own terms, and they're so memorable! I can't remember games I've bought since that I feel so rewarded by and proud to own. It's sad that I can't imagine anything quite like them coming out today. Lots of crazy, risky games come out on iPhone, but they just don't have the same size and quality. Not even downloadable games on PSN and Xbox Live quite have it, though a few have come close. So it was interesting to read on your website that one developer sees handhelds like Vita as the new home of middle-tier games [*Eufloria* developer Rudolf Kremers: www.bit.ly/UEN9Q2]. I think he has a point, saying that on Vita you can make big games for less than the home consoles, but I don't think many developers have really stepped up to the challenge. We get cut-down versions of those games instead, like *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* and *Resistance: Burning Skies*. So consider this a call for more risky big projects on Vita!
Chung Tsang

"Lots of crazy, risky games come out on iPhone, but they just don't have the same quality"

Well said. But surely Vita's already home to some: don't *Sound Shapes* and *Gravity Rush* live up to your wishes?



Chung Tsang got a lot out of *God Hand* and its ilk, so he was concerned to read about the fate of middle-tier games

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to topics on our website at www.edge-online.com

***Spec Ops: The Line* lead designer blames the publisher for the game's "tacked-on" multiplayer mode**

I actually think it's quite ballsy to say this so close to the release. He has nothing to gain by saying this in public.
Alexander Cederholm, Facebook

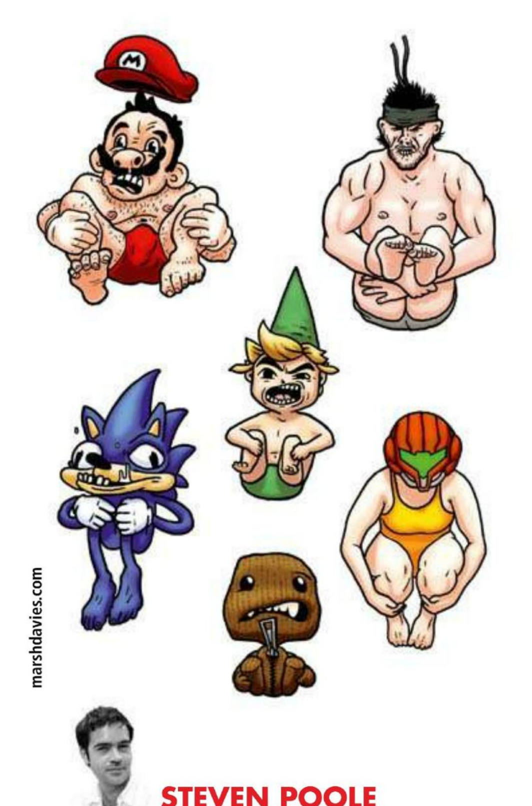
The singleplayer was a surprisingly strong title in the sea of military shooters and thoughtless 'storylines'. It is sad that publishers seem to insist that it's all about multiplayer these days.
Paul Anderson, Facebook

I actually quite enjoyed it. It was like the good old days of 2006 and playing *GRAW2* online. Old-fashioned but solid. Non-essential but enjoyable. I'm only against it if it meant the singleplayer suffered as that was simply superb.
Alistair Taylor, Facebook

Is David Cage right to say he'd rather give players meaning than fun?

I don't see why videogames have to be 'fun' to have merit. I get that games come from toys, but they don't necessarily *have* to adhere to the same rules. A film can give you a miserable time, yet be profoundly engaging and by all accounts great.
Simon Lundmark, Facebook

Cage is not pretentious. He's just ahead of the curve, and people are not ready to accept the medium as a deliverer of actual message and meaning, like film or literature. Although from the looks of it, it's pretty hard not to believe this title will be fun to play.
Marijn Smid, Facebook



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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

An epic Olympic gaming marathon raises questions about interactivity, control and hammering X to win

The Olympic Games, which as I write have recently ended, have in their televisual mise-en-scène become increasingly virtualised. The fencing looked like an 8bit game show from a dystopian future – people poking and slapping each other with swords on a piste that lit up with gigantic neon red or green lights in the middle of vast inky darkness. And while sports videogames have for years played on the aesthetic incongruity of placing a virtual event slap-bang in a recognisable non-sporting location, I don't know how they're ever going to top beach volleyball in Horse Guards Parade.

While sport itself is becoming all the more virtualised in its mass mode of consumption, videogame sports simulations strain to raise the bar of naturalism. I turned with a friend to Sega's official *London 2012* videogame as a farewell tribute to the not-quite-finished Games (somewhere in London people were still trying to punch each other in the face for medals). Now, the logical culmination of the fashion for motion control – which you could characterise as de-virtualisation of input – would be for an Olympic videogame to require you to leap so high in front of your Kinect sensor that you brain yourself on the ceiling and fall down dead in a broken heap in a forlorn attempt to win the virtual high jump while wearing Lycra pants and knee socks.

Luckily, that isn't the case. Actually, the most entertaining aspect of *London 2012* was the metagame we devised: we had to skip all the tutorials and figure out the controls for ourselves, keeping them secret from the other person. Eschewing motion control altogether for rigid ideological reasons, we discovered (believe it or not) that the mechanics for track-and-field videogames remain eerily similar to Konami's legendary 1980s button masher *Track & Field*, and its subsequent licensed reinvention as legendary joystick-breaker *Daley Thompson's Decathlon*. You hold one button (or stick direction) for a certain time until the right throwing angle is displayed; you press X really fast to, er, go really fast in the 100m or the keirin. The archery uses twin sticks cleverly and adds some chilled challenge with the ever-changing wind direction. The rapid pistol shooting event, though, is like trying to play an FPS while really drunk. (How do you make a shooting minigame interestingly challenging when gamers have had so much practice at virtual shooting? The answer here is to make the reticle acceleration insanely sensitive.)

> The problem any sports videogame faces is that it vitiates the purity of spectatorship

The diving, meanwhile, is pure QTE: press square, then square and cross, then point your stick downwards (because you're diving, like, down into the water?). At this point there is no difference between water sports and *Heavy Rain*, apart from the arbitrary illustrative visuals that you're only half-watching because you're concentrating on the tiny symbols. This is, of course, the permanent aesthetic defect of QTEs: whatever is happening 'behind' them – as in actually in the gameworld – is demoted in consequence, because it could be literally anything. Note to the IOC: for Rio 2016, I propose quick time eventing as the most boring demonstration sport possible.

In *London 2012*'s diving, it's still moderately hilarious, as you uncertainly wiggle your stick to watch your diver crash into the water in an undignified arseflop. But the problem any sports videogame – and especially any Olympics videogame – faces is that it vitiates the purity of sporting spectatorship. On the television screen, athletes move so you don't have to. Lying on your sofa covered in crisps and smelling powerfully of gin, you are the absolute monarch of athletic style, berating one competitor for sloppy technique or admiring another's blinging accessorisation of her outfit. Actually participating in sport, meanwhile, has (or so I've heard) its own rewards to do (probably) with aspects of self-improvement and comradeship. But a videogame offers a curious mélange. You're not participating in sport, but you are radio controlling a fly-by-wire inflatable model of a sportsperson; you're not lying back and enjoying the show, but you are still watching while you're doing. Which is more 'interactive', really: the interactivity of cheering while Mo Farah kicks round the final bend, or the interactivity of jabbing buttons while a nonexistent person does the same thing?

Strangely, the one thing sports videogames don't often mess with is time itself. The clock is king. But other genres of videogame cheerfully employ slow motion or 'bullet time' to heighten dramatic effect or make us feel as though we have lightning reflexes. Top track-and-field competitors do seem to experience time differently from the rest of us: Usain Bolt said he eased off at the end of his 200m win because he knew he wasn't on world-record pace anyway. In a videogame, then, why not build the events to be more nuanced and deep in terms of control and challenge, while making time elastic at crucial points so that the hundredths of a second pass far more slowly? That might better induce in the player something like the psychological gestalt of an elite athlete. But then I can't be sure of that; I only shout at them on TV.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

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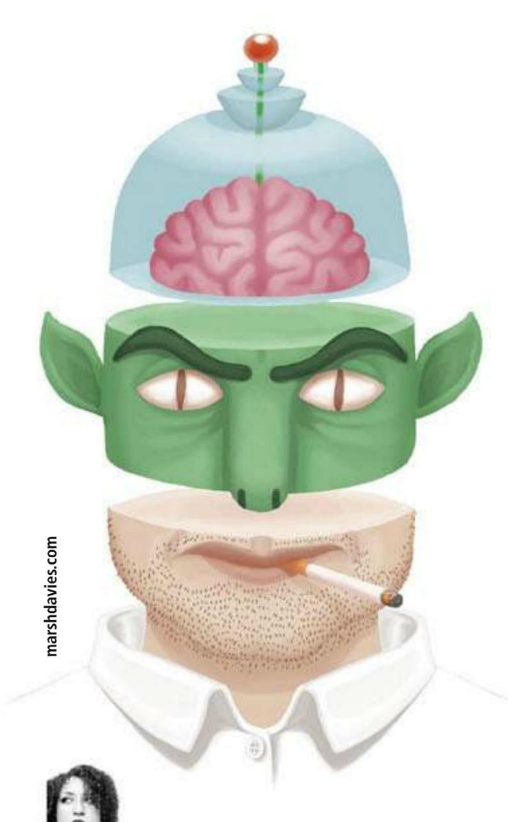
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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level head

If the industry wants to keep us excited, games need to try something they haven't done before

At a time when there's a sense of genre fatigue for most commercial games, it's titles exploring intriguing new themes that end up seeing the most buzz. We're generally happy to be patient for *BioShock Infinite*, excited to see how its ideas about American exceptionalism take place in a city in the sky. *Dishonored* is among 2012's most anticipated games for its imaginative marriage of industrialism with magic and gadgets. And early teasers for Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs*, a game about urban wars waged with information, got people hyped up at E3.

The enthusiasm surrounding games like these would seem to run counter to the wisdom that audiences want more of the same. These titles also have in common a refreshing focus on multiple approaches to problem solving and dealing with enemies; players are hungry for new kinds of conflict.

So why do fresh, poignant themes and ideas relentlessly tangle with implausible, far-flung techno-futures? Since we can clearly see audiences are intrigued by the promise of refreshing experiences, why not try something really new: the present? Actually, there are a number of reasons for this, and most of them are rational. It's just that many are also a bit lazy, and keep gaming clustered around the nodes of traditional escapism and supermarket science fiction when it's worth at least investigating the expressive breadth of the medium.

One argument against real-world settings is that they're too complicated, and thus easy to get wrong. The amount of research needed to create plausible, meaningful portrayals of interesting conflicts in reality is significant, and might never be enough to avoid stumbling into some pothole of ignorance.

Rather than risk trivialising reality, it's often easier to invent a fantasy universe – one with parallels to real life, but without the need for absolute detail. It's thought that this frees up the imagination, too, enabling developers to add visual richness and scale, and to invent entire histories. The unfortunate side effect is the absence of the precious immediacy that often makes gaming feel so personal. It's wonderful if a game can engender a fantastical sense of place and create memories of a beautiful dream world, but that mustn't be the only option – especially given that in recent years so many developers have expressed a passion for ensuring their work reflects meaningful values and concerns.

> Developers who want to make us think about issues often rely on visualisations of our future world

Those developers who do want to make players think and feel about the issues that matter today often rely on visualisations of our future world, where the circumstances that capture our imaginations now can be imagined to a believable conclusion. That way, a game such as *Watch Dogs* can address fears about social media and surveillance without straying into the dangerous territory of appearing to judge real individuals or issues – a hotbed many feel it's best to avoid.

There's also the fear of seeming 'dated'. Should developers make a commentary on our time, given those thoughts and ideas could feel irrelevant in ten years? This fear is often unfounded, however, since we still enjoy novels and films from earlier times. Today's readers still find Jane Austen's portrayals of the foibles of antiquated social order fascinating, and there are still lessons to be learned from films about the Vietnam war. No other medium labours under this fear.

Which leads to the next fallacy: why does a modern game have to be about 'world issues' or be possessed of a 'message' to begin with? From there, you could presume that demand for realism would lead to games about politics or current war – after all, the most visible examples we've got are the *Modern Warfare* games, which are limited to portraying intense non-stances on generalised conflicts.

The final common argument is that audiences really aren't interested in real life. Just look at the sales: people want to feel like powerful warriors from another land. That argument conveniently overlooks the great swathes of the modern gaming landscape that desire something new – most fantasy worlds involving mysterious beasts, plate armour and Star Wars-esque aliens seem increasingly similar, and it's naïve to think we'll keep buying and liking these things. Adults say they have no more time for games, but I think it's more likely games just aren't relevant to adults any more.

A mature medium is able to illuminate and experiment with the issues that concern modern people: personal stories, family drama, the gripping and immediate challenges of getting by in day-to-day life. This doesn't need to mean the mundane. How about a story of a fantastical happening within an otherwise-ordinary family, where recognisable everyday details would pique the player's imagination about finding themselves in the same circumstance?

The imagined becomes more exciting when we can contextualise it against that which we already touch. Fantasy aside, there are no shortages of vivid stories or incredible circumstances in the lives of humans; there are numerous definitions of challenge and empowerment that games have yet to explore.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



marshdavies.com



BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

Ending years of rumours and anticipation, Kojima reveals his new direction after Metal Gear Solid at E3 2017

The big news at E3 this year was the long-awaited revelation of concrete details about Hideo Kojima's mysterious 'Project Care'. Way back in 2012, the iconic *Metal Gear* creator stirred up rampant speculation when he told CVG, "I'm turning 50 now, so if I'm going to approach new topics, it might be something more on a human level, like the concept of love, or rearing a family." Those intriguing words are finally bearing fruit in the new game emerging from the secrecy of Project Care: *Plastic Nappy Liquid*. Read on for our exclusive, spoiler-packed preview.

Putting the player in control of Large Dad, the patriarch of a small household in the gated suburbs of Cloud Nine, *Plastic Nappy Liquid* plays like a cross between *Cooking Mama* and *The Sims* as imagined by Quantic Dream. Such is its beauty that gasps were audible when it was demoed on the E3 show floor. With a heavy focus on stat management, emergent interaction, and relationship building, it also turns over a new leaf in the career of the legendary stealth-action architect.

When *Plastic Nappy Liquid* begins, you see a cutscene establishing the warm and loving relationship between Large Dad and his son, Firm Baby, who breakfast together in a tasteful Cloud Nine townhouse, apparently without a family matriarch. After the movie ends, your primary task is to get Firm Baby ready for school via a combination of quick time events, conversation trees and contextual commands, all while carefully monitoring gauges that track his levels of happiness, sulkiness, constipation, deliciousness and insanity. These variables affect his behaviour, as well as Large Dad's, in various fun ways.

For example, if Firm Baby gets too sulky, he lies face down on the floor and refuses to dance for you; if he isn't sulky enough, he won't stop dancing until his heart explodes. Judicious dispensation and withholding of oatmeal raisin granola bars – Firm Baby's favourite snack– will keep his sulkiness in check. As his constipation increases and his happiness depletes, you can choose whether to administer a laxative and let him watch cartoons, or switch him to a high-fibre diet and sign him up for spinet lessons, depending on your preferences regarding helicopter parenting. And while we won't spoil what happens if Firm Baby gets too happy, be assured that it's both adorable and messy.

> The upshot of it all is that Firm Baby eventually learns he is his own grandmother

Above all else, you should be careful of letting Firm Baby get too delicious, or you might eat him. To bring his Deliciousness gauge down, be sure to feed him plenty of cumin and asparagus.

This enjoyable but slightly monotonous gameplay cycle of caring for and trying not to devour Firm Baby, all while keeping him dancing a healthy amount, more or less repeats when he gets home from school. The key to getting the most out of *Plastic Nappy Liquid* is to max out Firm Baby's Insanity meter as quickly as possible, which is achieved via a series of insincere compliments, armpit pinches, useless gifts and light slaps. In a funny sort of Easter egg, you can boost Firm Baby's insanity faster by letting him play *Metal Gear* games on a virtual console.

Once Firm Baby is completely insane, things really start to take off. In a sudden and stunning reversal, Firm Baby is revealed to be a genetic clone of Blunderbuss Manatee, the prime minister of the United Kingdom, who is herself a clone of Gaseous Baby, Firm Baby's long-lost quarter-brother, who was cast adrift in a basket after being born with a full Insanity meter. Blunderbuss Manatee also turns out to be the missing mother of Firm Baby, the niece of Large Dad, and the third cousin of Firmus Baby, Firm Baby's cyborg uncle-in-law who runs the secret government conspiracy in which they're all enmeshed – with a little help from his adopted son/psychic clone/evil twin from the future, Nude Baby.

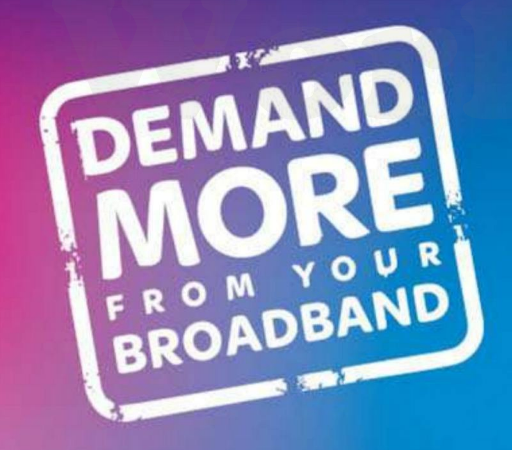
There are other tangled branches in this family tree, but the upshot of it all is that Firm Baby eventually learns that he is his own grandmother. This is more than his already taxed young mind can bear. So, playing as Large Dad, you must sneak past all of the other Babies and Manatees in Cloud Nine for a climactic townhouse battle with Firm Baby. The latter certainly lives up to his name, absorbing a seemingly infinite amount of damage as he tauntingly recites your credit card information, having managed to covertly access saved PlayStation Store data.

In a final and mind-bending twist of conventional videogame logic, the only way to beat Firm Baby is to rip your console from the wall and hurl it out of the nearest window, buy a new console, recover your save data, turn back your new console's internal clock to exactly when the old one struck the pavement, cancel your credit card, and then replay the boss fight with an oatmeal raisin granola bar shoved into the second controller port.

A series of sequels, spin-off titles and mobile versions is already planned, including *Plastic Nappy Liquid: Mall Walker*, *Plastic Nappy Liquid Ayahuasca*, and *Plastic Nappy Elevation: Upheavalution*.

Brian Howe is a freelance writer who covers games and more. His mind was blown at a young age by Kojima's genius

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"AN UNCOMMONLY RICH AND WELL-ROUNDED GAME"
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#246



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

The free-to-play Goliath



This month's cover star isn't just an astonishingly consumately produced slice of mechanised warfare. It's also the first free-to-play game to grace the front of this magazine (not counting games released with a subscription model and subsequently re-engineered: our apologies to *DC Universe Online*). It won't be the last, however. As *Marvel Heroes* (p62) also shows this month, and as titles like *Tribes* have proved, the pricing model is very quickly shrugging off associations with 'casual', social gaming and hastily localised Asian MMOGs, and quickly becoming the first choice for studios working on big-budget PC projects.

For many, *Hawken*'s approach to the model will be the preferred one. There are few genres more ripe for being outfitted with a microtransaction economy than mech combat. This is a typology built upon a foundation of gear-swapping and stat-tweaking, and putting real-world cost on doing so could easily spoil the appeal of customisation, which should be about selecting the best tools for the job at hand. Instead, it becomes a question of working out the best tools you're willing to pay for, and leaving the game wide open for the frequent complaint that it's a case of 'pay-to-win'.

Hawken will ensure that all game-altering items or weapons are available as unlocks too, though even here, of course, those players prepared to pay up are sure to have access to more of the best goods sooner than anyone else. All other paid-for items will be cosmetic, an approach Adhesive Games terms "pay to be fabulous" (or as fabulous as anyone can look on a post-apocalyptic battlefield).

Free-to-play undoubtedly satisfies many players. But even *Tribes* has been criticised for offering a steep unlock curve to thriftier contenders. Skill-based gaming requires careful balance at the best of times, and *Hawken* must prove you can offer a sliding scale of paid-for rewards while preserving it.

MOST WANTED

EX Troopers 3DS, PS3
A *Lost Planet* spin-off with a gorgeous anime look, *EX Troopers* is set in EDN's lush, lethal landscape. Aiming to deliver team-based multiplayer similar to *Lost Planet 2*, *EX Troopers* will arrive on Japanese PS3s and 3DSes in November, but no word on a western date.

Yatagarasu 3DS
A trio of ex-*King Of Fighters* staff blaze a 2D fighting trail to the eShop with what looks like a spectacular homage to the team's history and a fine use of their expertise. Looking for an unofficial, spiritual sibling to *KOF*? Look no further.

MGS: Ground Zeroes 360, PS3
Kojima's much-flaunted Fox Engine finally has its day in an open-world *MGS* pitched as a prequel to the next entry in the main series. *Ground Zeroes* is targeting current-gen home consoles, but the footage released thus far could easily be mistaken for a glimpse of the next generation of hardware. Trust Kojima.



Even though this is certainly among the least practical pilot helmets ever devised by man, it does give us a taste of *Hawken*'s technologically advanced sci-fi setting



HAWKEN

Fast-paced multiplayer mech combat is jetting onto PC this winter

Publisher Meteor Entertainment
Developer Adhesive Games
Format PC
Origin US
Release December 12

When Adhesive Games put its *Hawken* reveal trailer on YouTube in March 2011, it didn't count on it becoming a sensation. The plan was to email the link to a few news sites and gradually build awareness from there. Adhesive was a small indie studio at the time, with six staff, three interns, and no marketing budget. What it did have was an impressive amount to show for Hawken's first nine months of development, including a dystopian futuristic metropolis, mechs scuttling about in frantic ground combat, a hulking mothership looming overhead, and a swarm of missiles gliding through the air with slow-motion grace.

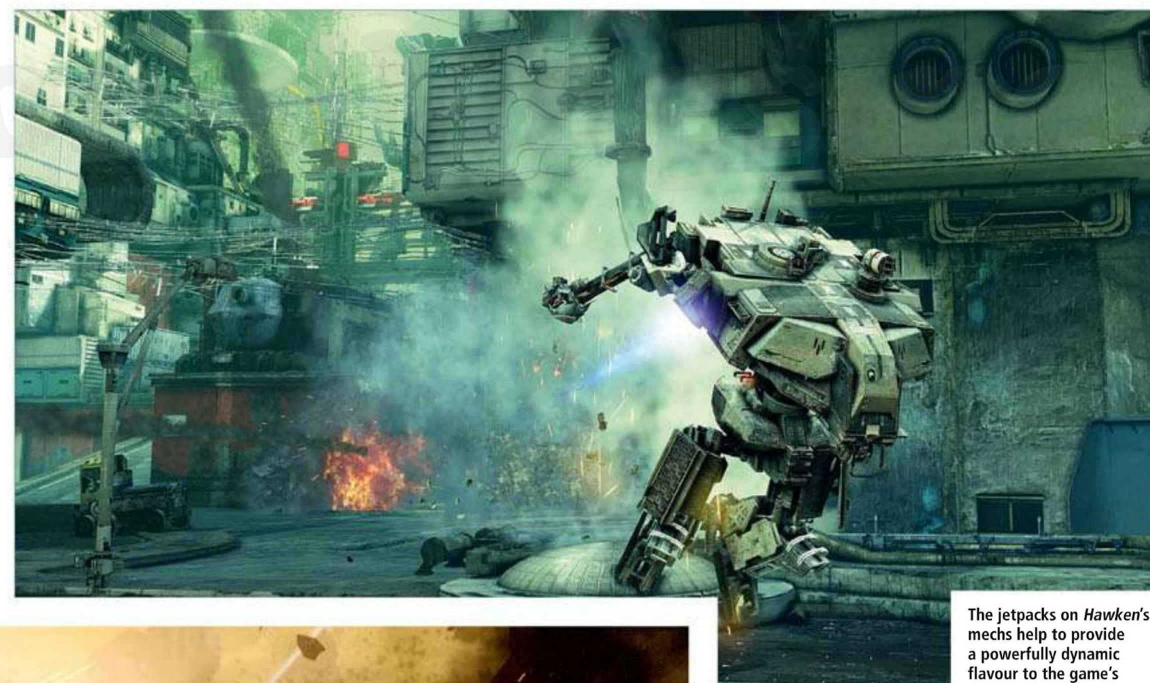
Of course, combat mechs in sci-fi have traditionally been modelled after dinosaurs, lumbering with a T. Rex's earth-rattling stomp. They're lethal but cumbersome, each one toting around a scrap yard's worth of metal in its frame – all pistons, wires and hulking artillery. Accordingly, gameplay in mech games has remained fairly beholden to this sense of mass. What came across in that early trailer is true today: *Hawken* is ready to upend this status quo, with mechs that offer the nimble twitch gaming of a modern FPS. It's an adrenaline shot to the genre's heart.

Amplifying the emotional impact of the world's first glimpse of *Hawken* was the sort of elegiac soundtrack you'd expect to hear playing over a summer blockbuster trailer. It, like the rest of the reveal video, provided Hans Zimmer magnitude on an art house budget. For the track, *Hawken* creative director **Khang Le** reached out to a web programmer friend named Shadi Muklashy, a polymath who dabbles in music and sound design as a side hobby. Le's only direction was that he wanted something like Blade Runner and Batman, a mix of orchestra and synthesiser.

The finished *Hawken* trailer spread across the Internet like a brush fire. The morning after posting it, Le recalls being shocked to see that it had broken 300,000 views. Adhesive had a follow-up video of gameplay footage ready, which got nearly a million views. Things started moving quickly after that. The phone rang incessantly. The lead producer of *Final Fantasy VII* made a special trip from Japan to visit Adhesive's studio in Pasadena, California. Every major publisher – EA, Activision, Konami and more – wanted a piece of *Hawken*. So did private investors. "I was getting lots of random emails", recalls Le, "from people saying, 'Hey, I want to invest in your game. Here's $10,000.'"

It was around this period that some guy named Mitch Lasky started emailing him. Le wrote him off with the rest of the email suitors, assuming he just wanted to steal a





BELOW The game's sublime particle effects heighten its sense of cinematic spectacle. This glimpse of a mech flying through the smoke-filled twilight is surprisingly arty

The jetpacks on *Hawken*'s mechs help to provide a powerfully dynamic flavour to the game's fast-paced ground combat





chunk of the IP. "Lasky emailed us like three times, but he always wanted to meet at 9am and we don't get [into the office] till 1pm, so I kept saying I had meetings even though we were all just sleeping. But he was so persistent, I was like, 'OK, let's meet at 11am then.' That's the earliest I could get up."

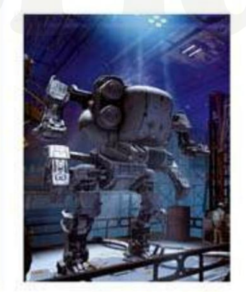
The two met at a dingy restaurant next to Adhesive's office. Lasky came prepared with an ambitious plan for *Hawken*, including strategies for transmedia and how to best exploit the emerging free-to-play business model. Le told Lasky that if he could find him a business guy to handle that side of things then he was interested in talking more, but for now he wanted to focus on making the game. Months passed, and Adhesive was close to striking a deal with "one of the biggest publishers" when Lasky got back in touch and invited the team to meet his investors.

"I Googled him up and it was like: Mitch Lasky, Benchmark Capital," says Le. "They're one of the biggest investment funds in the world. They funded Twitter and eBay and *League Of Legends*, and I was like, 'Holy shit, man, I had no idea who he was.' I think in some ways he kind of liked it, because he's used to people begging for money. I only found out later that he had flown a chartered plane in for [our initial restaurant meeting] because he's a super-busy guy."

Lasky recruited free-to-play veteran Mark Long to be the business guru Le had asked for, serving as the CEO of Meteor Entertainment, a new publishing company set up expressly to bring *Hawken* to market. Adhesive retains full creative control and Le gushes about the hands-off approach of the investors. "It still feels like an indie project," he says, "a bit like Valve in terms of the ownership we have over our project. And we're 21 people now."

So what was *Hawken*'s secret? The answer isn't simple, but rather a constellation of factors. For one thing, there's no getting around the necessity for sheer talent and expertise. In terms of the latter, the core team of Adhesive had already worked together on a fantasy game called *Project Offset*, which was acquired by Intel as a technology showpiece for its Larrabee graphics card. When Intel aborted the card, *Project Offset* – over four years in the making – was cancelled too.

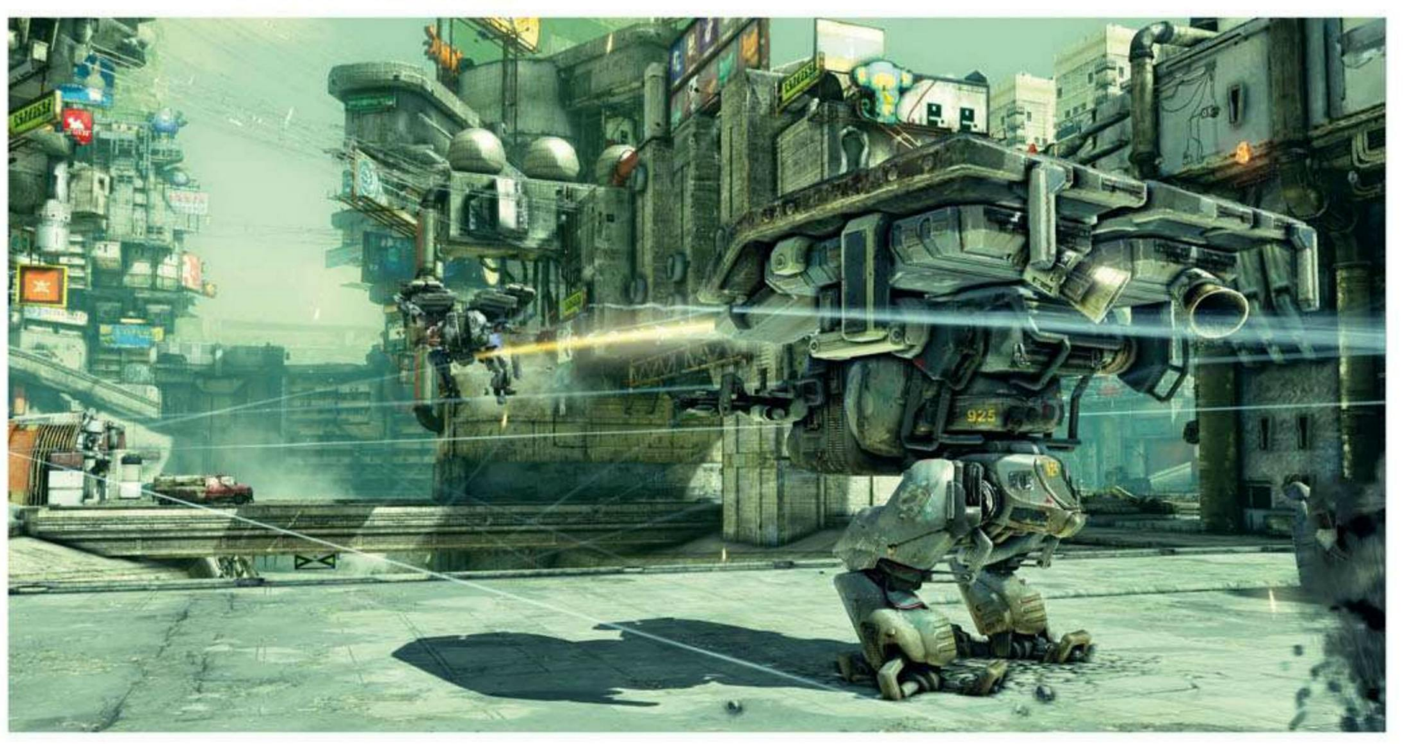
Le was fortunate enough to start work with the *Project Offset* team in 2005, well before Intel's acquisition in 2008. It was an experience that cemented his belief in the power of a good promotional trailer. While working as a concept artist for NCsoft, a friend had sent him the link to a promotional



BELOW Adhesive began work on *Hawken* with Epic's UDK, allowing it to use existing *Unreal Tournament* code to get a decent prototype up and running in mere weeks, before upgrading to UE3

Custom shop

Players who like customising war machines owe the free-to-play model a big thank you. *Hawken* initially contained just three standard mechs to choose from – light, medium and heavy – and no customisation options. When the decision was made to publish it as a free-to-play title, however, Adhesive changed direction. Investor Mitch Lasky saw huge potential in a free-to-play mech title, given how many people love to tinker with the design of what they're piloting. Creative director Khang Le recognises the allure: "I always say you're playing Barbies, playing dress-up. But that's what people really enjoy."



LEFT *Hawken*'s creative director, Khang Le, worked as a graphic novelist and freelance concept artist prior to launching Adhesive Games – hence the gorgeous concept art. He was also creative director on the cancelled *Project Offset*

video for *Project Offset*. He was so enthralled by it that he drove an hour north to the cramped apartment in Riverside where the fledgling team was and offered his services.

"I was getting paid like $100k in a super-cushy job on Third Street in Santa Monica, and I quit," says Le. "I basically went to work for these guys for free for like three months before we started getting funding, because I was so passionate about the project. So I know the power of a video. A video can make me quit my job."

The money Le had set aside from the Intel acquisition provided the seed money for Adhesive. After meticulously running figures, he determined their four-person development team could survive for about a year. This meant it had to set manageable parameters for the project so it could ship on time.

The team only had one animator, so the game couldn't feature a human character. Art assets needed to be easy to recycle, which you could only get away with in a sci-fi context. The game had to be multiplayer-only, too, since the cinematics and scripting associated with singleplayer were unrealistic given the time frame. Finally, the mech genre seemed to be dormant, and primed for a resurgence.

Working with the Unreal Development Kit also helped Adhesive get something playable up and running quickly. "Within two, three weeks of putting a team together, *Hawken* was playable," says Le. "It was all greyboxed. We had the grey model HUD, you could see the mech, and we were playing a match. Because UDK already had *Unreal Tournament* code in there, it was very quick to just change the visuals, add jetpacks and the programming."

The view through the cockpit at Gamescom offers up a manic theatre of carnage

The view through the cockpit when we see a Team Deathmatch underway at Gamescom shows a lot more than grey boxes. It offers up a manic theatre of carnage – mechs swooping in from above, evasive manoeuvres, trails of ➲



BELOW Adhesive recently announced that it's building in support for the Oculus Rift virtual reality headset, which should fit perfectly with the immersive cockpit view



smoke behind missile volleys, all set against a fabulously detailed post-apocalyptic urban milieu. The bobbing head of the mech adds a thrilling layer of immersion. You always feel like you are the pilot of an extraordinary machine, not the machine itself, which is a subtle but vital distinction in terms of how the game feels as you play. A standard military FPS feels serene and clinical after rampaging about in one of *Hawken*'s mechs.

Gameplay also departs from the standard FPS multiplayer template in another key respect: *Hawken*'s mechs can absorb plenty of damage. So instead of every head-to-head encounter ending with one of the parties as a wreck, there's a strategic wrinkle of being able to repair your mech, provided that you can escape to safe harbour long enough to do so. This also encourages cooperative hunting strategies, where a pack of teammates are rewarded for converging on a single mech isolated from the rest of his squad in the post-apocalyptic landscape.

The kitbash aesthetic of *Hawken*'s architecture is partially drawn from Le's childhood in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh), Vietnam, where the absence of building codes meant people would just demolish and rebuild structures to suit their purposes. His father was a high-ranking officer in the South Vietnamese government during the Vietnam conflict, leading the US government to afford him veteran status and provide an avenue to relocate his family when Le was 10 years old. "When people see Blade Runner, they're like, 'Oh my God, it's such a dingy place,' but when I see it, it feels kind of comforting – the liveliness of people, the hustle and bustle."

Le may have a great affection for bustle in his urban surroundings, but he'd prefer to keep it out of his professional life. He's extremely proud of the fact that the team hasn't crunched at all on the project, even with the December launch date coming into view. Being night owls, the standard workday for Adhesive's team used to be 1pm to 9pm. That's had to change, however, in order to align communication with their publishing wing. "We can't come in at 1pm any more," Le says with a laugh. "Eleven am is the latest!"

Given how gorgeous it looks, it's easy to imagine *Hawken* using its drool-prompting visuals to compensate for lacklustre gameplay. We're pleased to report this isn't the case. Adhesive's game has the makings of a new staple of multiplayer PC gaming. The fact that the Electronic Sports League invested considerable capital to host *Hawken* at its Gamescom pavilion shows the high hopes the wider industry has for this new entry. And the palpable excitement of show attendees suggests the fervour around that first reveal trailer hasn't diminished one bit. ■



Q&A
Khang Le
Creative director, Adhesive Games

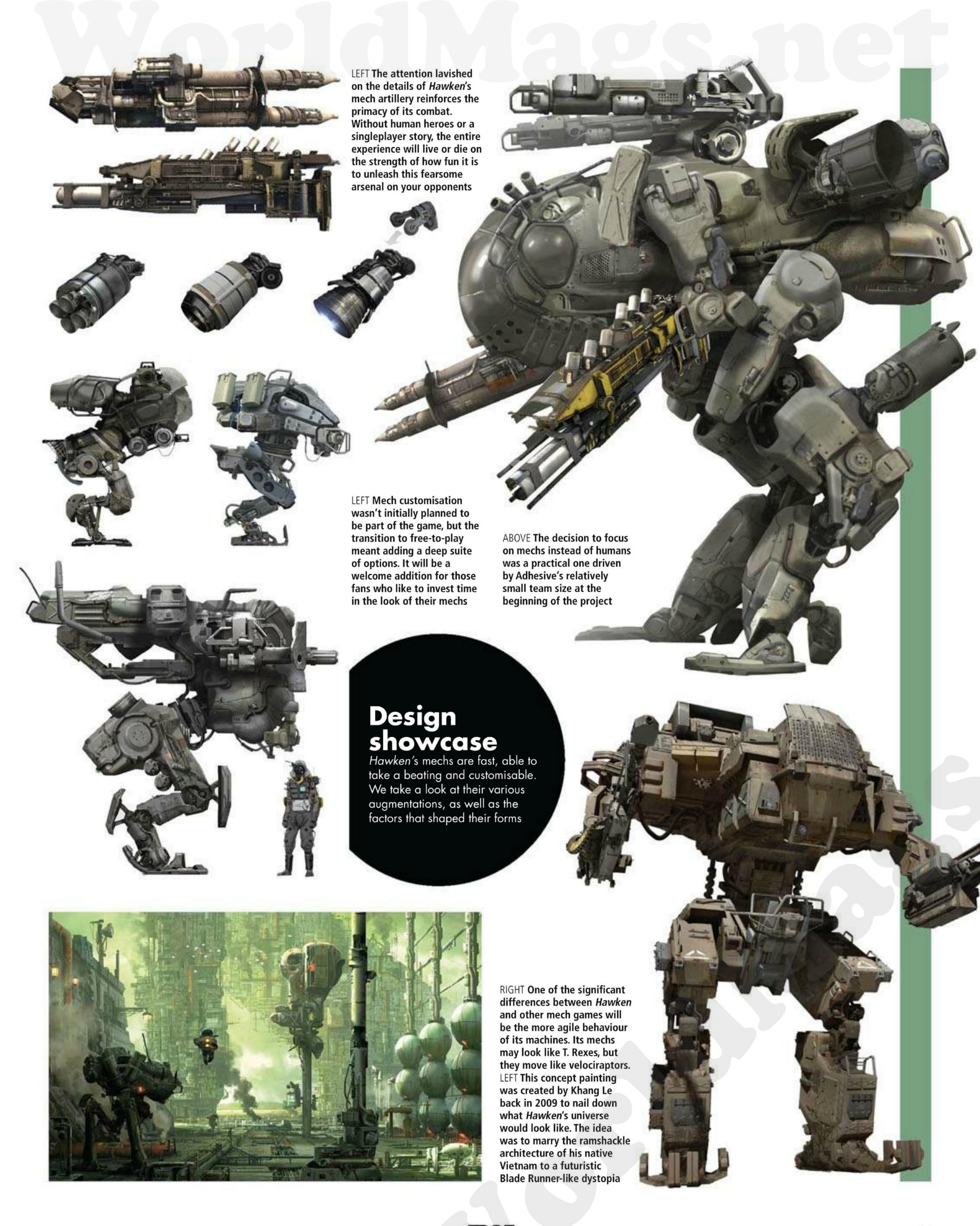


People complain about games being overly grey. Did you have any concerns about the monochrome palette of *Hawken*'s cityscape?
That's only one map. We've got like four or five other maps that are very varied. There's one in a desert; they all kind of feel different. But in general I decided to go for something a little grimy, and a sort of realistic kind of look. In contrast, we've placed these really colourful cutesy signs everywhere. Because I really like when you go to Japan and their structures are so industrial and you won't see, like, a tree at all, but then you get a very colourful Hello Kitty sign plastered over it.

How did you keep the tech requirements manageable for such a small team?
Hawken looks good not really because of the tech. It's more about clever ways to trick the eyes... Each asset is actually very simple. It's almost like *Resident Evil 4* kind of techniques; it's about the overall picture, like the way films are made. It's not really about going up to the wall and seeing perfect normal maps. It's the general impression, like *Shadow Of The Colossus*; it's about the atmosphere and the lighting. We're focusing on that, because we don't have enough people to make a perfect fire hydrant or whatever.

Will you have an option for players who don't like the cockpit view?
Having a cockpit really helps sell the feeling that you're in a mech. At the same time, it's not just about immersion, it's about playing a game and making sure it's fun. So we're always trying to have that balancing act. Because, for me, I love immersion, but for another player the field of view is too little [and] they want a wider angle, or don't want the mech's head to bob. They want accuracy. So we're thinking about having those things as options – letting the player choose.

When you secured investment, did you consider building a singleplayer campaign with the extra funds?
It's definitely not a blank cheque, but it was a good budget, so I'm basically doing again exactly what I was doing at the beginning. If we're getting $100, we will make sure we only use $80. Because the game was already playable and fun on the first few videos, all it needed was good free-to-play content – the store, the items, the networking and the marketing. But the core element of the game, the visceral feeling [players] get when they play the game, was there over a year ago. That's the biggest fear, right? Is it fun or not? Everything else is like fluff on top.



LEFT **The attention lavished on the details of *Hawken*'s mech artillery reinforces the primacy of its combat. Without human heroes or a singleplayer story, the entire experience will live or die on the strength of how fun it is to unleash this fearsome arsenal on your opponents**

LEFT **Mech customisation wasn't initially planned to be part of the game, but the transition to free-to-play meant adding a deep suite of options. It will be a welcome addition for those fans who like to invest time in the look of their mechs**

ABOVE **The decision to focus on mechs instead of humans was a practical one driven by Adhesive's relatively small team size at the beginning of the project**

Design showcase

Hawken's mechs are fast, able to take a beating and customisable. We take a look at their various augmentations, as well as the factors that shaped their forms

RIGHT **One of the significant differences between *Hawken* and other mech games will be the more agile behaviour of its machines. Its mechs may look like T. Rexes, but they move like velociraptors.**
LEFT **This concept painting was created by Khang Le back in 2009 to nail down what *Hawken*'s universe would look like. The idea was to marry the ramshackle architecture of his native Vietnam to a futuristic Blade Runner-like dystopia**

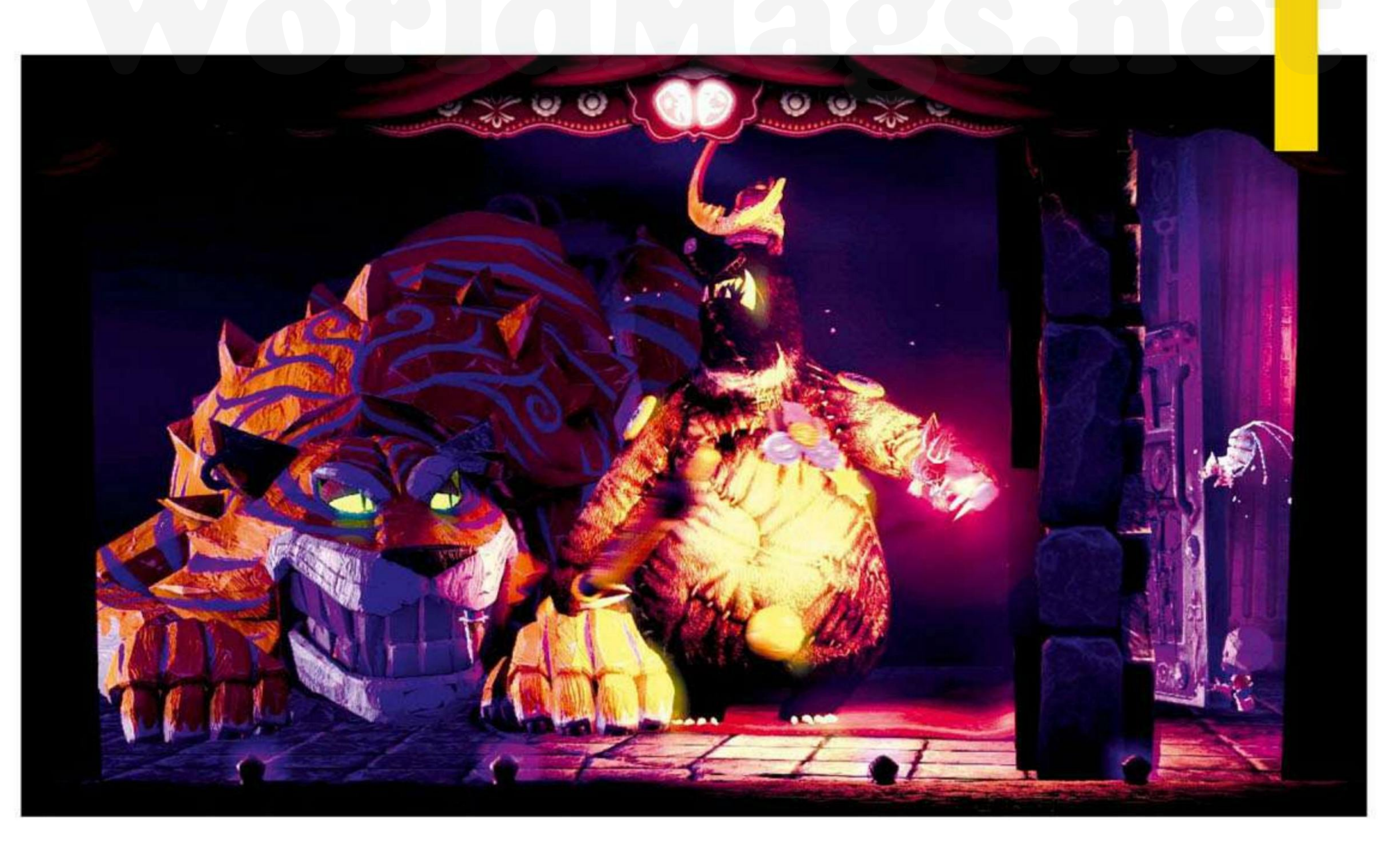


PUPPETEER

Quirky imagination steals the show in this dramatic new platformer

Publisher	SCE
Developer	In-house (Japan Studio)
Format	PS3
Origin	Japan
Release	2013

The protagonist is a wooden puppet called Kutaro, whose head has been ripped off by the Moon Bear King, leading him to seek replacements



ABOVE **This shot of the Moon Bear King and his pet tiger shows off the dramatic lighting effects used to illuminate Kutaro's world**

Puppeteer breaks with gaming's march towards absolute photorealism. It's always refreshing to see a game whose protagonist couldn't conceivably be played by Jason Statham in the event of a movie adaptation, and SCE Japan Studio's latest veers into a cheerily macabre fairy-tale world that looks like what you'd get if Tim Burton decided to make an animated Pinocchio film – equal parts delightful and disturbing.

"I have friends in Japan who work for, let's say, a large RPG company," says *Puppeteer* creative lead **Gavin Moore**, "and they just put reflections in characters' eyes. Can you imagine doing that for three years? You'd go insane. That's why we as a team decided to push away from that realistic side, so we didn't have to render wrinkles on people's faces and reflections in their eyes any more. And we could concentrate our power on actually creating stuff that would be surprising and make you want to play."

Puppeteer is indeed stuffed with surprises. The protagonist is a young boy named Kutaro, who gets whisked away to a dark castle on the moon by the maleficent Moon Bear King. Things are not going well for our young hero, and his soul's soon stuffed inside the body of a wooden puppet. Then he displeases the King, who proceeds to chomp his head clean from his body, leaving him to scramble about in search of replacement heads that impart special abilities and let him interact with the world around him in new ways.

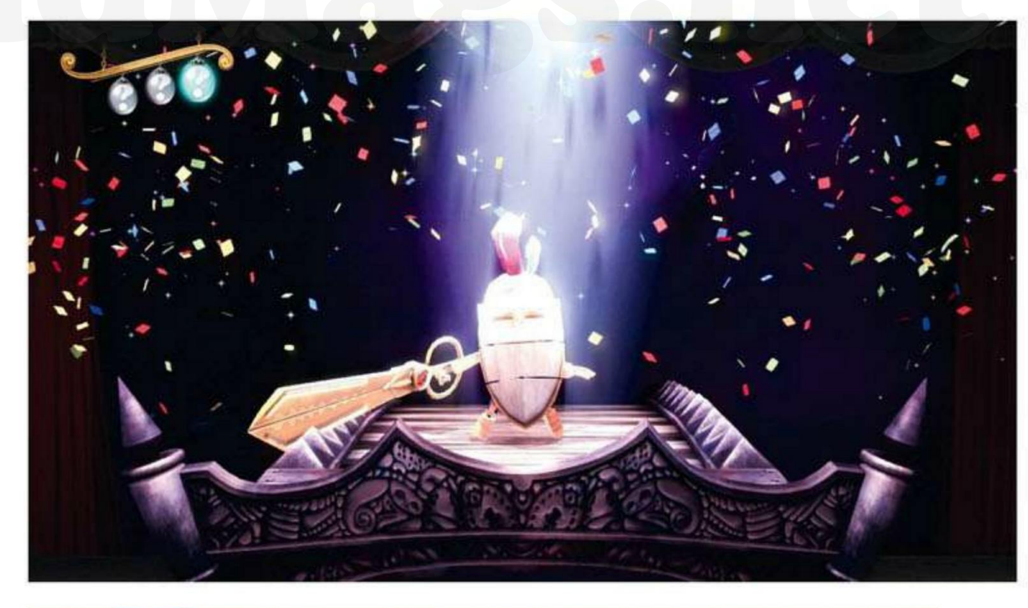
In order to escape his predicament, Kutaro will need to commandeer a pair of magical scissors called Calibrus (a play on the name Excalibur?), which fate has chosen him to wield. It's the kind of premise that you can see keeping yawning youngsters pleading for another chapter of their bedtime story. While many contemporary game directors aspire to

Things are not going well for our hero, and his soul's soon stuffed inside a puppet

be the Steven Spielberg or Michael Bay of videogames, Moore may just end up being the medium's JK Rowling.

According to Moore, *Puppeteer* grew out of a desire to press defibrillator paddles to his son's imagination and give it a friendly jolt. He had grown puzzled over the frequency with which he'd bring home some cutting-edge game for his son to try out, only to watch him play for 30 minutes before growing bored and throwing the controller on the sofa





RIGHT **The magical scissors Calibrus have a variety of gameplay applications, including snipping enemies made of cloth to death**

to go play outside. For a game designer, this trend was understandably worrying.

We're shown a tutorial stage from the very beginning of the game, which finds Kutaro climbing up through the castle to confront the Moon Bear King. The stage-production framework was inspired by Moore's love of Japanese Bunraku puppet theatre, and the conventions of live theatre are woven into every aspect of the production. The fixed view also means the developers can meticulously frame each shot.

Each scene lasts about five minutes before the set dressing changes with a wobbly, creaking flourish. One particularly memorable scene finds Kutaro passing through the castle kitchen, leaping between boiling pots as eggs and pieces of bacon go cartwheeling across the screen in a kind of culinary blizzard.

The vivid colour palette feels even more saturated due to the theatrical lighting rig

The vivid colour palette of these stages feels even more saturated thanks to the theatrical effects; *Puppeteer* simulates a full lighting rig, representing 140 lights with realtime volumetric light and shadow. What's more, an offscreen audience will 'ooh' and 'ahh' at your accomplishments, or gasp with collective shock when something frightening happens. There's an extra layer of delight in feeling as though you're not just playing, but performing for an appreciative audience.

In gameplay terms, *Puppeteer* draws inspiration from classic Nintendo 2D platformers. The left stick controls Kutaro, while the right stick directs a witch's cat named Yin Yang, who can fly about the stage and search out hidden items, or provide hints as you progress. We see Yin Yang help Kutaro find a spider-shaped head that enables him to interact with spiderwebs throughout the castle. We also get to watch Kutaro try on a skull head and a hamburger head. If an enemy hits you and knocks your head off, you'll have three seconds to chase it down before you expire. And obtaining the magical scissors opens up a whole new gameplay dimension, part of which involves hitting square to snip apart enemies made of fabric, and cutting strategic patterns in the backdrops.

Though 2D puzzle-platformers tend to be relegated to PSN, *Puppeteer* is no downloadable hors d'oeuvre. The game is a full Blu-ray release that Moore assures us will have "more content than you'd imagine," (see 'Spice of life').

With so many Japanese games courting the west with bland Hollywood archetypes, Moore wants to tap into a visual whimsy that his studio is well equipped to provide. "You know what the Japanese people are great at?" asks Moore. "They're imaginative. You let them go and they will create wacky stuff. And I like wacky weird stuff." ■



What doesn't quite come across in screenshots is the dynamic sense of movement in the bits of set dressing. As you play, pot lids will be rumbling away, for instance



Spice of life

Because 2D platformers tend to be downloadable games by default, Moore stresses that *Puppeteer* is a full Blu-ray release with a remarkable amount of depth and variety. "*Puppeteer* is huge, it's absolutely huge," he says. "There are image boards for every single situation in our game, and they're full of wild and wonderful situations. So it's not only variation in sets and changing how gameplay works, it's also variations in the settings as well. And it's also variations in the amount of enemies we have in our game. I think people are going to be a little bit shocked by the amount of stuff we throw at you."



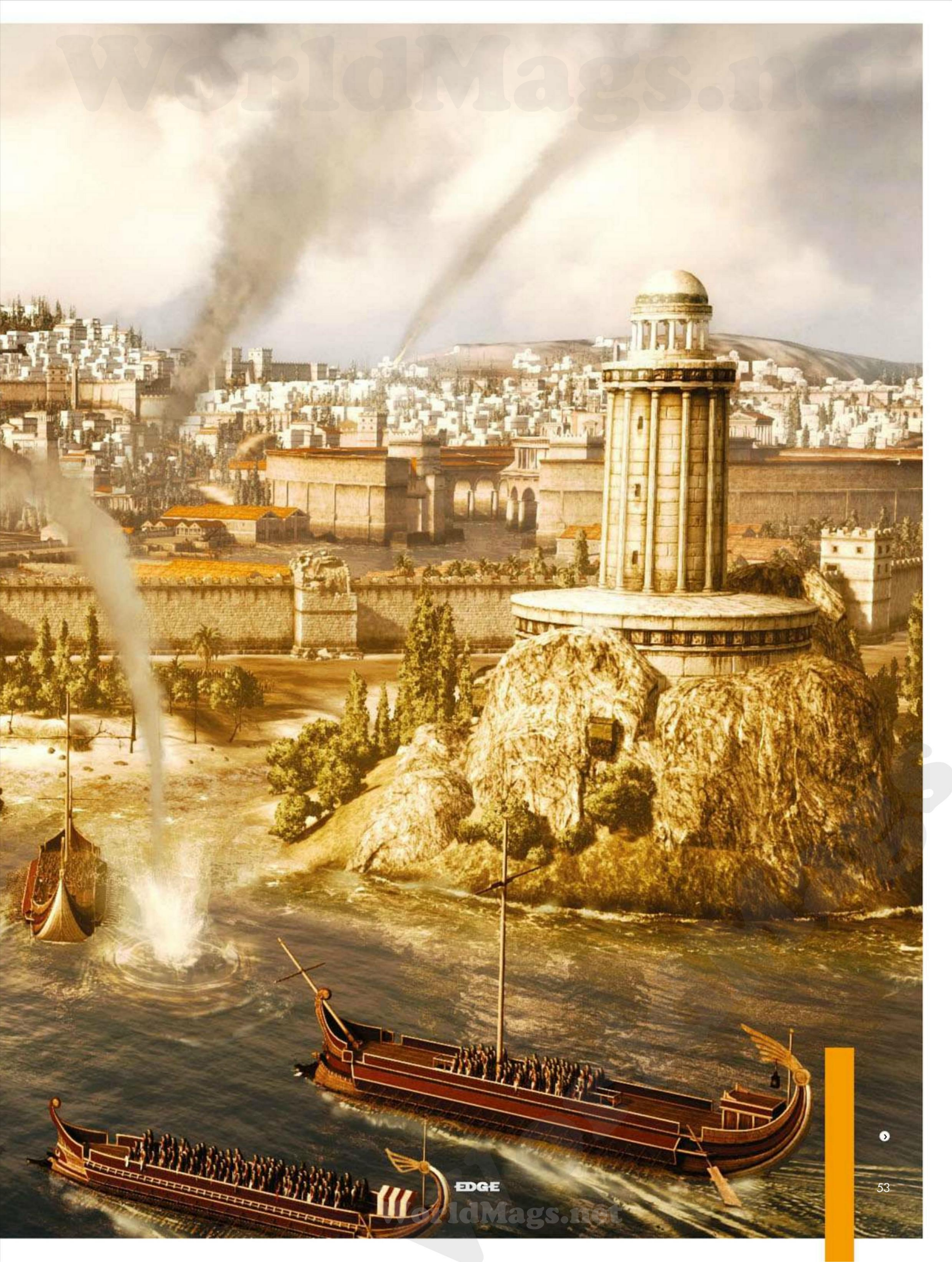
This wide-angle shot of the Siege Of Carthage shows the level of detail Creative Assembly has managed to build into its historical set-piece

H Y
P E

TOTAL WAR: ROME II

Carthage crumbles as the Romans attack the city by sea

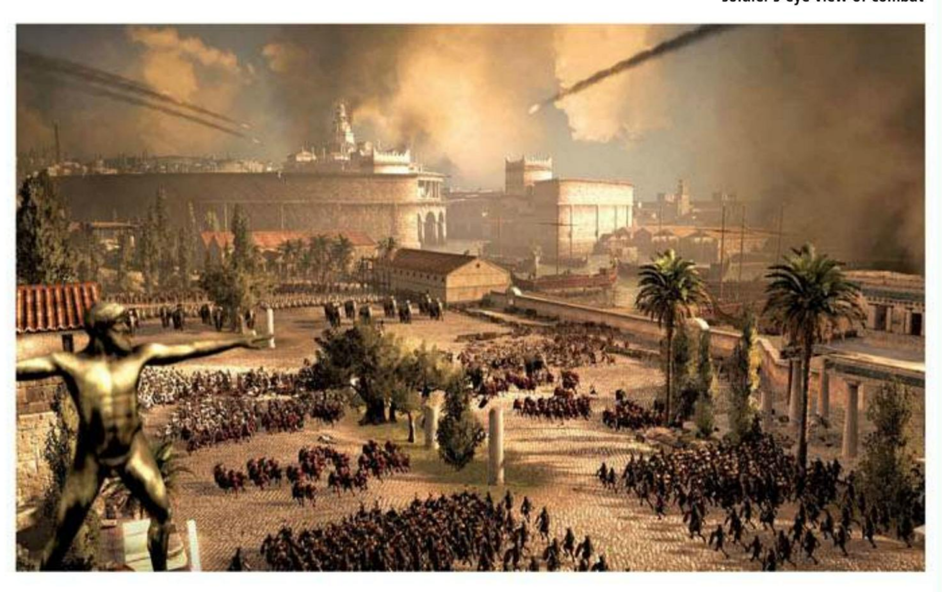
Publisher Sega
Developer The Creative Assembly
Format PC
Origin UK
Release 2013





TOTAL WAR: ROME II

BELOW **While this image showcases a zoomed-out perspective of the Roman ground forces, you can swoop in dynamically at any time to get a personal soldier's-eye view of combat**



Creative Assembly's first demo of the newest entry in its *Total War* series brings to life the pivotal Battle Of Carthage, which marked the end of the Punic Wars. It's a shrewd conflict to spotlight, given the combination of both a wide-scale naval landing and a bitter ground assault. After witnessing a brief exchange between a Roman commander and a subordinate aboard a ship just off the coast of North Africa, we watch as the boats land and hordes of Roman soldiers pour out onto the beach.

"We're talking about the Saving Private Ryan [Normandy beach landing scene] of the ancient world," says lead designer **James Russell**. "It's a darker vision of war than we've had before, because war is gritty, it's dirty, and I think it's inevitable that when you really push that human level of detail, you end up with a darker vision of warfare. The Roman legion was a machine, you know? So it was a more brutal, more visceral form of combat – let alone having maniac barbarian tribesmen swarming at you."

That vision's presented through a flexible camera, which enables you to zoom your viewpoint out to take in the full scope of the battle, or right in to shoulder-surf a warrior (in what the studio is calling 'soldier's-eye views'). One moment we're surveying the scene from above, watching columns of smoke rise from the city as incendiary projectiles hurtle through the air in dramatic arcs. By the time this apocalyptic climax arrived, Carthage had already been under steady bombardment for a number of years, and the devastation is plainly apparent. The next moment, we've zoomed in to the interior of a siege machine, and watch fidgeting soldiers ready themselves for the inevitable clash. A unit commander shouts for his charges to hold steady.

The game allegedly has a 40 per cent larger budget than any previous *Total War*, and even in this pre-pre-alpha demo, the level of polish is already remarkable. "It's about having a lot of content," says Russell. "And of course we've got to do that for all of these different cultures as well. So we've got the barbarians and all the barbarian tribes, and these eastern factions. And the environments need to vary, so you've got all these different cities. You saw Carthage, but Rome itself and the Barbarian settlements look different. This is one of the reasons why the game is so expensive to make, why we've got a budget that is way [bigger] than anything we've done before." ■

> ***"The Roman legion was a machine, so it was a more brutal form of combat"***

Q&A

James Russell
Lead designer, Creative Assembly



What are the technological hurdles of letting players zoom in and out so much?
Technically it's a challenge because we're trying to keep the minimum spec the same as *Shogun 2*, so that it's accessible to a whole range of machines. What we have is quite sophisticated tech for streaming in higher levels of detail when you zoom in. So technically there is a challenge, because obviously your eye picks up different things in the far distance versus up close. So we have to have each soldier [with] a really detailed cinematic skeleton with a very high poly count, and then when it zooms out, he has to become three pixels. So that's a challenge, but I think that's one of the unique features of the *Total War* tech over the years, and we're really just trying to improve that.

Do you ever feel creatively constrained by working with actual historical events?
Quite the opposite; history inspires us and gives us a huge wealth of crazy content. We don't feel it's a constraint that we've got to follow. I mean, there's so much mad stuff in history that you could never make up. I think when we choose a period we try to do everything we can to recreate the setting authentically, and I think that really adds to immersion. History gives us free gameplay in a way, because [in] real cultures when they're at war, or competing over the generations, there's an arms race – someone will try something, someone will do something to counter it, someone will do something to counter that, and so on. So all these things aren't the invented tech trees of a game designer, they're real responses and adaptations. That's just one example of how history creates inspiring content to wrap a game world around, rather than it being a constraint.

How do you manage such a vast battlefield simulations?
The simulation aspect is scary. In a classic RTS, you'll have one unit against another, and there'll be a rule that determines the kill rate. When those men are in cover, there'll be another rule applied; maybe it halves the kill rate. Whereas when you're doing full simulation, the kill rate is determined by the ballistics, [and] the exact properties of the arrows and where they're flying. So that means where the men are standing, how they're spaced, and the intervening geography determine the kill rate. And that's really scary as a designer, but it means you get these emergent properties coming out of the simulation. And some of those are situations and things that we may not have thought of as game designers.

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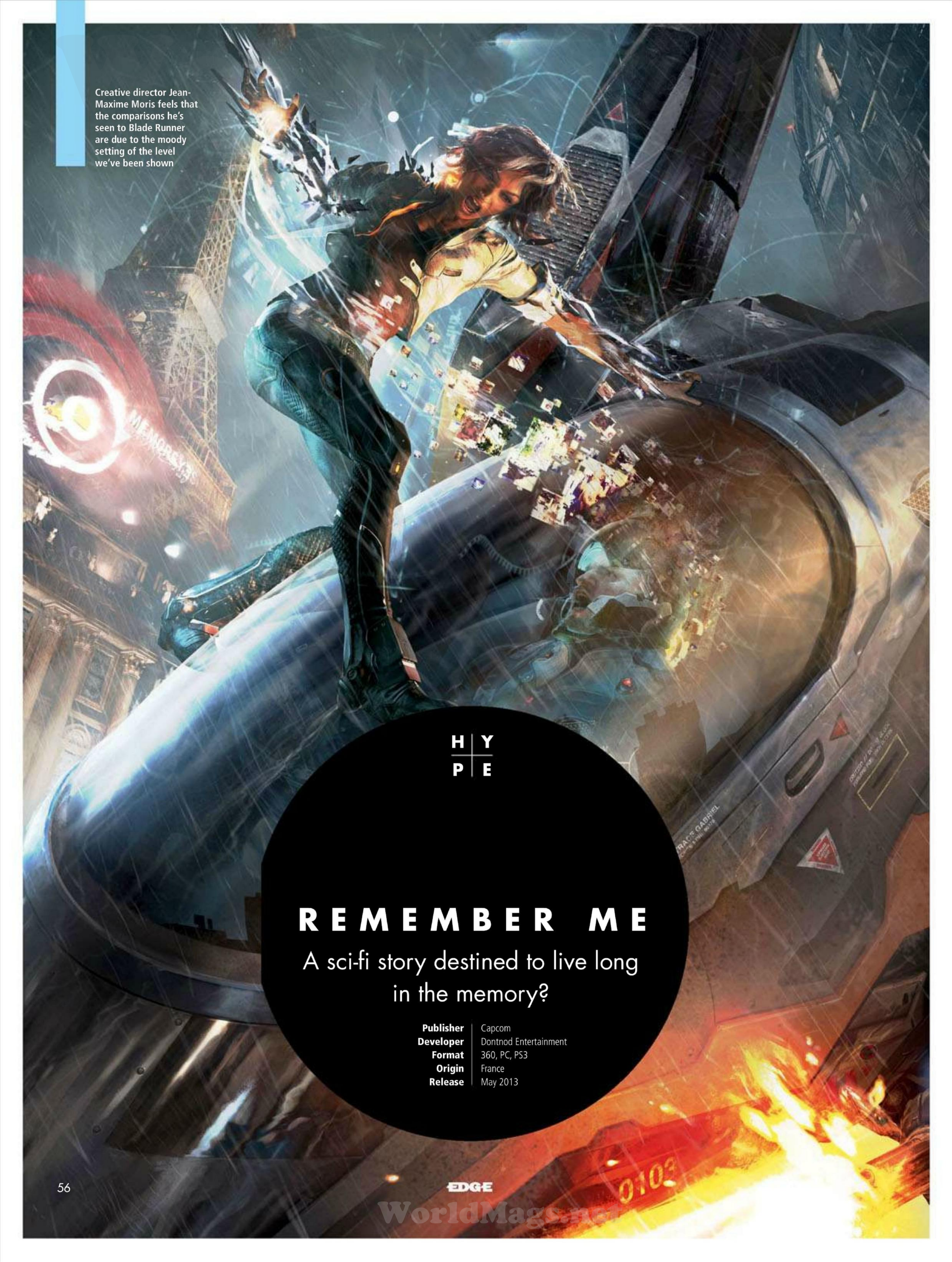












Creative director Jean-Maxime Moris feels that the comparisons he's seen to Blade Runner are due to the moody setting of the level we've been shown

H Y
P E

REMEMBER ME

A sci-fi story destined to live long in the memory?

Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Dontnod Entertainment
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	France
Release	May 2013

Nilin can temporarily incapacitate her enemies by piping so many memories into her victim's skull that their brain, unable to deal with the feedback, temporarily shuts down

The tail end of this generation has given rise to a number of politically charged sci-fi thrillers and, fittingly given the medium, many have chosen to study the interaction between humans and technology. But while the likes of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* focus on the impact technology will have on the human body, *Remember Me* prefers to concern itself with the psyche. Specifically, it explores the power of memory.

"You are your memories," creative director **Jean-Maxime Moris** explains. "Consider a memory you have, and all the senses and emotions associated with it. Each memory goes some way [towards] shaping who you are as a person. Now imagine that someone comes in and reshapes that memory. How does that change you, and how does it in turn affect the people around you?"

All of which sets the scene for *Remember Me*'s dystopian take on a future Paris, where an umbrous corporation named Memoreyes holds the ability to delete, remix or otherwise alter the proletariat's memories via cerebral implants. The heroine is an activist named Nilin ("We wanted a female protagonist because, above all else, this is a story about human intimacy," explains Moris), a member of a rebellious faction named The Errorists.

Or at least she was. As a memory hunter, Nilin also has the ability to remix people's memories, but when *Remember Me*'s curtain rises, she finds herself hoist with her own petard – alone, amnesic and locked in the Bastille. "The hunter has become the hunted," intones Nilin's voice actress in the small segment of footage that fails to impress.

In play, however, *Remember Me* aims to be as mixed as its narrative influences, which span from Memento to Marxism (see 'Value system'). For the most part, this means we can expect an *Uncharted*-esque jaunt through Paris as Nilin stalks around for clues.

We know Nilin won't be afraid to use force – *Street Fighter IV* producer Yoshinori Ono is advising Dontnod on combat – but the Gamescom footage (which shows a part of the game that has now been cut, explains Moris) reveals that she can choose quieter methods, too. After crossing a canopy, our heroine gets within mind-reading range of some guards and learns the location of a victim, who she finds asleep in a high-rise.

She could kill him outright, but that would leave a needlessly messy trail. Far better to crack into his mind and 'convince' him to do the deed himself. And so, after learning that our target's wife left him after a row, we shift into Memory Remix mode. From its disembodied viewpoint, Nilin is granted the ability to manipulate objects in the room to distort the subject's memory of events.

After some experimentation, we remove the safety catch from a gun being waved in anger, causing our victim – in his mind at least – to kill his wife in the heat of the moment. Wracked with guilt, he commits suicide. Job done, all without a trace of Nilin.

While the promise of altering fates by rejigging memories is intoxicating, the reality of this first instance doesn't quite live up to our expectations. There is a defined solution to the puzzle, and it takes simple trial and error to reach it.

It's still an intriguing premise, though, and later puzzles might offer greater freedom and complexity. Even if they don't, the concept alone should give Capcom a wealth of options to use in designing scenarios. But regardless of how the finished game turns out, it's hard to deny that, on a conceptual level at least, *Remember Me* is hard to forget. ■





Value system

Remember Me is set in 2084, exactly 100 years after Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four. It's no coincidence: Moris wants to show what comes after that. Moris and his team have also turned to contemporary French philosophy to determine how technology will affect traditional hegemonic social models, as defined by Marxism. "Philosophy's instinct is that it'll be more horizontal," explains Moris. "Power and influence won't just come from the government – instead the flow of power will become less clear, with more poles of control. I want *Remember Me* to ask serious questions about how much power we willingly give to others."

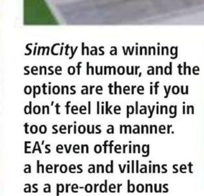


SIMCITY

Why Maxis' bustling streets promise to be more social than ever

Publisher EA
Developer Maxis
Format Mac, PC
Origin US
Release February 2013 (Mac TBD)





SimCity has a winning sense of humour, and the options are there if you don't feel like playing in too serious a manner. EA's even offering a heroes and villains set as a pre-order bonus



ABOVE **A new feature called SimCity World will function as a kind of social network, enabling players to engage in periodic challenges and compete on leaderboards.** RIGHT **Pedestrians and drivers in *SimCity* all have motivations driving their simulation behaviour, and if you click on one, you'll gain insight into what they're thinking. These are probably admiring the SimBrandenburg Gate**



You can now specialise your city so it's designed around a particular industry, such as tourism. You could recreate the Vegas Strip in your image, incorporating familiar landmarks in new ways

The social and mobile space has seen a profusion of building sim titles of late, making the pace of construction in Dubai seem almost lackadaisical by comparison. Farms, cities, diners, towers, airlines, even game studios: if you can name it, there's probably a sim themed around managing it. The genre is perfect for dipping in and out of at regular intervals to tinker with and observe the pocket-sized world you've set in motion.

We get the sense Maxis has looked on wistfully from the sidelines as this flowering has occurred, eager to get back into the city-planning game and apply some of the emerging social gaming trends to the sort of robust simulations it helped to construct in the first place. The online facets of *SimCity* surfacing in recent announcements would seem to bear this impression out.

A new feature called SimCity World will serve as the social hub for your game, hosting your friends list and showing which friends are online at any given time. CityLog, meanwhile, will function in a similar fashion to Facebook's news feed, showing what your friends have been up to lately.

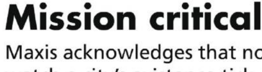
Competition has been a driving force behind the growth of civilisation for ages, and *SimCity* will be no different. Global and friend-focused leaderboards will show you how you stack up against other community members in categories such as population, city cleanliness, crime level, and so on. Maxis will also serve up dynamic challenges on a regular basis, which may be cooperative or competitive in nature. Perhaps players will need to work together to create 10 million new jobs, or regions will be asked to compete to see which can boost its population by one million residents in the shortest time.

Another new feature involves city specialisation. Don't feel like building a generic metropolis? Now you can specialise to become a coal city, a tourist city, or any number of other options. And the choices you make in your city will ripple out and affect the world around you. If your coal city is dumping huge amounts of pollution into the air, then that might adversely impact on neighbouring cities, depending on the wind pattern. The economic life of your city will be much more dynamic, too, since a global market will influence the prices of goods.

During a brief hands-on, we're able to get a sense of how it feels to set a new *SimCity* metropolis in motion. We click and drag a road to connect our city to a nearby highway so that residents can move in. We turn on a power station and watch as tiny globules of energy begin to flow along our grid lines to the surrounding houses and business. We demolish derelict buildings, and grin as the animation shows them crumbling to the ground. Every piece of feedback – scaling up from the sound design and animations to the overall behaviour of the city – offers players a steady dopamine drip, and a palpable sensation of progress.

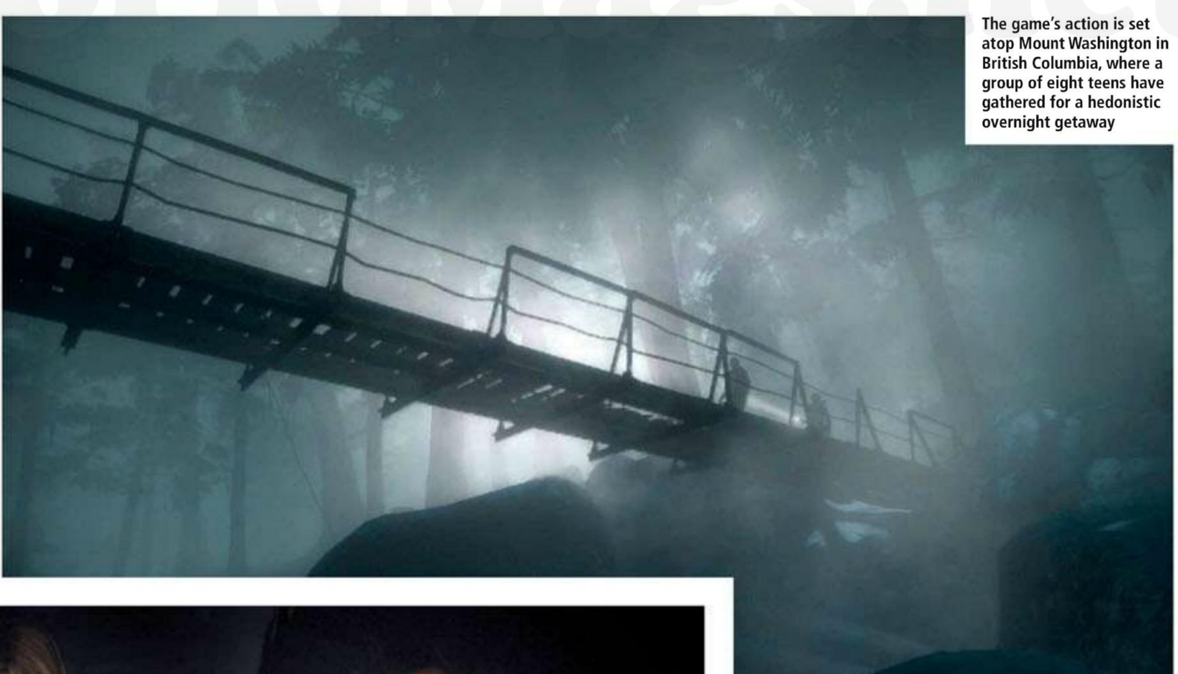
You can still toggle the speed of the simulation between three levels – Turtle, Gazelle and Cheetah – depending on your taste. But now clicking on a random car motoring down the road causes a little speech bubble to pop up: "Couldn't find food for baby. Driving home." These little glimpses of the human experience playing out makes the reality unfolding feel less plasticine and contrived than previous *SimCity* entries. Or rather, it didn't feel contrived until a scripted meteor strike brings our city and demo to an untimely end. At least we don't have to worry about that crime problem any more.





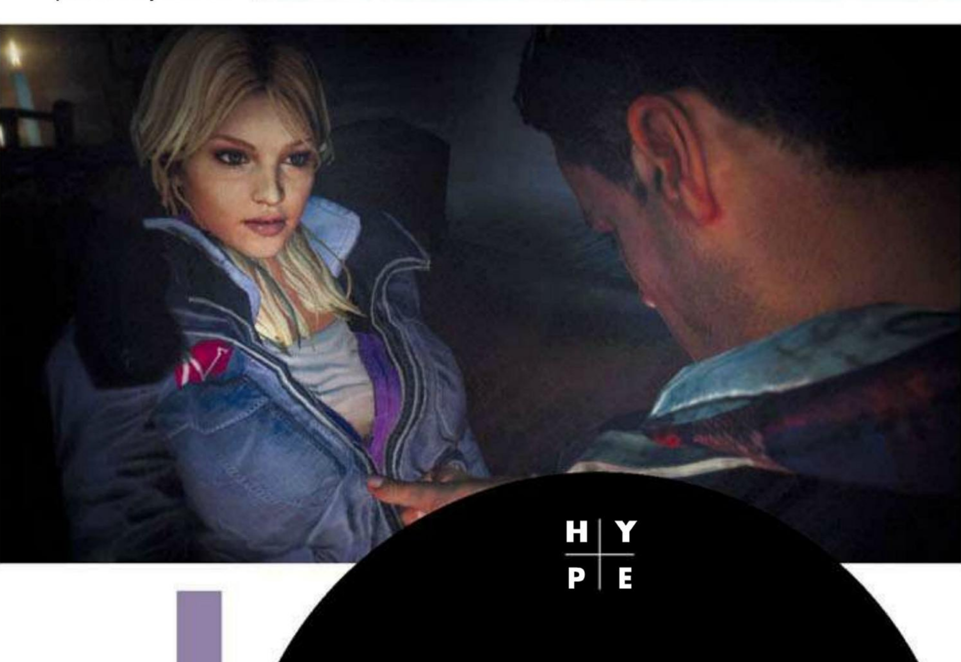
Mission critical

Maxis acknowledges that not everyone is content to merely watch a city's existence tick over, and is more than happy to oblige the goal-focused. During our hands-on session, the game served up various missions to pursue, such as boosting our city's population to 3,000 residents, or increasing hourly income to $10k. Of course, there's a host of ways to approach these objectives, including leveraging *SimCity*'s social dimension. Friends in the same region can help you by sending commuters to work in your city, or you could work together to build a regional airport to help your tourism or import/export industry.



The game's action is set atop Mount Washington in British Columbia, where a group of eight teens have gathered for a hedonistic overnight getaway

BELOW **One of the more inventive examples of *Until Dawn*'s Move controls involves using a controller gesture to unzip another character's jacket prior to a sexy cinematic**



H | Y
P | E

UNTIL DAWN

An isolated cabin in the woods. Two randy teens. One deadly evil

Publisher | Sony
Developer | Supermassive Games
Format | PS3
Origin | UK
Release | 2013

The sort of pattern-matching puzzles we saw in the demo will seem familiar to anyone who's ever played a *Resident Evil* or *Silent Hill* game

When you consider the legacy of survival-horror in videogames and the fervency with which contemporary game developers look to Hollywood for inspiration, it's surprising the teen-horror genre hasn't spawned many modern gaming counterparts.

The recently announced Sony exclusive *Until Dawn*, developed by Guildford-based Supermassive Games, is one step towards correcting this oversight. The game's plot follows the exploits of eight teenagers over the course of a single night spent on Mount Washington in British Columbia, Canada, during an ill-fated visit to a luxury ski lodge belonging to one of the group's parents.

In keeping with the conventions of the teen-horror genre, these unfortunate adolescents may well find themselves being killed off one by one as the night progresses. "Usually as they're trying to get off with each other at inappropriate moments," adds executive creative director **Will Byles**.

Because electrical power must inevitably get severed in such plots to escalate tension, the Move controller functions as a battery-operated torch. Its beam of light will determine the direction you walk while holding the trigger, while the Move button allows you to interact with objects in the environment. In a clever gameplay twist, passing the torch between characters changes the firstperson vantage accordingly.

In the demo we're shown, two horny lovebirds, Michael and Jessica, peel off from the party to go find a place to get frisky. They've been exiled – or "sex-iled" as Jessica quips – and told to get a room. The only problem is that room is located in a remote cabin away from the ski lodge, and requires a hike through the moonlit, snow-covered woods. What could possibly go wrong? The hypothetical audience looking on smirks and takes another handful from its tub of popcorn.



The outdoor environments offer amazing atmosphere, from moonlight sifting through the tree branches to the sound of boots crunching through snow

"We're really keen to get this to be watchable as well as playable," says Byles. "We want couples to sit down and play the game, or groups of people, so it's not just a person on their own having the experience." That the act of simply sitting in a dark room and watching the demo is enjoyable bears his words out; we never feel our hands growing fidgety due to not being in possession of the Move controller.

Further encouraging this sort of group dynamic, *Until Dawn* features the occasional pattern-matching puzzle of the kind that will be instantly familiar to any fan of *Silent Hill* or *Resident Evil*. These should prove ideal for conscripting spectators on the couch to help the player out.

Our frisky teens reach the cabin, and pretty boy Michael finds the torn pieces of some kind of handwritten list, which he must assemble by moving them into place with the Move controller. When investigating an object, the act of turning it around to examine different angles bears a striking resemblance to *LA Noire*'s crime scene investigations.

If the demo we saw is any indication, the game has a refreshingly languid pace. Michael and Jessica's journey through the woods to the cabin takes a considerable amount of time. And there doesn't appear to be a sprint option available to speed along the journey. This encourages you to take in *Until Dawn*'s sumptuous visuals and sound design, which provide a rich backdrop to the couple's bad puns and double entendres.

"It's so cold in here, my tongue would get stuck to your flagpole," jokes Jessica when the pair finally reach the cabin. Then she sends you off to get the furnace running. The most forbidding obstacle to this much-delayed sexual encounter is just about to arrive, however, taking the form of a menacing supernatural presence hovering just outside. And based on what happens next, that foe is certainly no laughing matter. ■



Sexy time

Compared to the medium of film, which has few qualms about portraying sex, games have traditionally been timid in their depictions. The same goes for *Until Dawn*, despite its surprisingly bawdy double entendres. Just after using the Move controller to unzip Jessica's winter coat, the perspective cuts strategically away to an outdoor vantage point. Is this a double standard, given the near-pornographic levels of violence? "I don't think we could [topple that sex in games taboo] in a watershed moment," says Byles. "I think it's got to be a cultural change that will gradually happen as people aren't offended by it."



HYPE

MARVEL HEROES

Marvel characters and Diablo systems make for one exciting crossover

Publisher	Gazillion Entertainment
Developer	In-house
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	TBC

Marvel Heroes' characters exhibit their namesake's powers, but skill trees will allow for personalisation. If you want a Wolverine who concentrates on slashing, that's fine; if you want an athletic stealth killer, that works too

Superhero MMOGs don't work – at least not how we imagine they should. The likes of *Champions Online*, *DC Universe Online* and *City Of Heroes* all have fans, but fall short of the promise suggested by offering superpowers in a vast multiplayer world.

Designed by *Diablo* co-creator **David Brevik**, *Marvel Heroes* comes at the problem from a different tangent. It is being pushed as 'Marvel meets *Diablo*', but online and in a persistent universe. The MMOG element is almost an aside to the main thrills of dressing up as a hero, getting together with mates, and pounding enemies to score loot and upgrades.

The Marvel credentials are certainly here. Over 20 heroes have already been announced – including Hulk, Punisher and Spider-Man – and, unlike in *DC Universe*, participants will be able to directly control them rather than merely selecting them as mentors. A cabal of supervillains will also figure, although Doctor Doom is the key antagonist. Somehow he has acquired the Cosmic Cube, and will do untold damage with it if given the breathing space.

The story is being written by veteran Marvel scribe Brian Michael Bendis, who has the unenviable task of tying the many character universes together into one cogent plot.

In action, *Marvel Heroes*' world is segregated in familiar MMOG fashion, with towns, public combat zones (PCZs) and private zones. Apparently, towns won't be instanced, while PCZs will contain around 50 players as well as open missions that require those present to join forces to, say, defeat a major foe. Private zones will involve just you and your party, and are made up of quests and boss battles. Here, players take on missions that build into the narrative, a tale explained through animated comic book sequences.

One MMOG element you won't find is grinding. "I don't want a quest system that is, 'Kill four wolves and pick six berries' – getting rid of that was step one," says Brevik. "I wanted to tell more of a story, like *Diablo II*. I mean, those games have quests, but... they're part of an experience that tells a story."

At Gamescom, we tried one level, which starts in the X-Mansion. A gang of robed maniacs named The Purifiers has besieged Mutant Town and must be stopped. The controls are familiar: click where you want your character to go, click enemies to attack, and use the S, D, E and F keys to unleash special powers. The neat isometric visuals portray a dark cityscape loaded with detail, while the miniaturised hero models convey a surprising amount of character and energy. It very much is *Diablo* meets Marvel, and soon you're rampaging about as the Hulk, throwing cars and grabbing coins from felled victims.

Also from *Diablo* comes the game's extensive branching loot and upgrade system. Each hero has their own recognisable set of powers, of course, but slots are available for new ones, as well as for various armour and weapon items – all carefully themed. The developer is also promising continual updates to the base game, including new quests and characters; there will be no $40 expansion packs delivered every few months.

And, of course, it's free-to-play. Gazillion isn't talking specifics yet, but seems to be applying a light touch, with paid-for character customisations. "We wanted to get people in and playing first and foremost," says Brevik. "Then they can enhance their experience by buying stuff. But you don't pay to win or to defeat Doctor Doom; no one is blocked from progressing. I'm trying to create something where, if you like *Diablo* or if you like Marvel, why *not* try it? What have you got to lose?"



Personal heroes

In *Marvel Heroes*, there is no limit on how many people can play as a certain hero in one instance – you can have a whole guild of Hulks if you like. However, the customisation and progression systems should ensure individuality, explains Brevik. "You'll play your Wolverine in a different way to mine. It's like *Diablo*: the way you play your Amazon is different from me – mine might have a bow; yours, a spear. With Wolverine, mine would concentrate a lot on bleeds, [while] you could emphasise acrobatic moves. We're building that depth into the characters. Your wolverine is the one you imagine the character to be."



DON'T STARVE

Publisher Klei Entertainment | **Developer** In-house | **Format** PC | **Origin** Canada | **Release** TBA



This top-down survival sim is a departure for Klei, maker of the excellent *Mark Of The Ninja* (see p106). Casting players as a gentlemen scientist trapped in a mysterious wilderness, at first glance *Don't Starve* looks like bleak, twisted take on *Animal Crossing*, with said intrepid explorer venturing through sepia-tinged woods with axe in hand. The focus here is simply staying alive; food must be hunted for and scavenged, and tools are made from materials found in the wilderness. There's a hint of *Minecraft* in the crafting mechanics and the parallels don't end there, since the creepiest creatures only come out at night.

SIR, YOU ARE BEING HUNTED

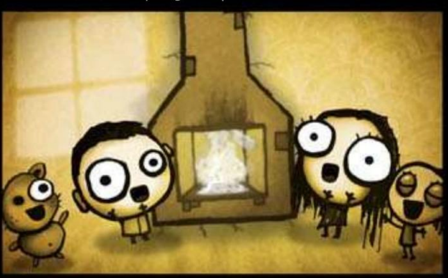
Publisher Big Robot | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** UK | **Release** 2013



There's a haunting beauty to the procedurally generated English countryside in Big Robot's pastoral game of cat and mouse, the technology powering which we looked at in **E**244. But the game itself is equally intriguing, asking you to explore these locales while avoiding a pack of robotic aristocrats searching for you (and each other). Still in its early stages, *Sir, You Are Being Hunted* hopes to offer something far more interesting than your average battle against the AI.

LITTLE INFERNO

Publisher Tomorrow Corporation | **Developer** In-house
Format iOS, PC, Wii U | **Origin** US | **Release** Winter 2012



The grotesquely adorable style of *World Of Goo* is more than evident in this first project from Tomorrow Corporation, a team made up of 2D Boy co-founder Kyle Gabler, *Henry Hatsworth* designer Kyle Gray, and ex-EA dev Allan Blomquist. Details are scant, but puzzles with burning things seem likely.

STARCRAFT II: HEART OF THE SWARM

Publisher Blizzard Entertainment | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** US | **Release** 2012



The singleplayer campaign of the next instalment in Blizzard's trilogy of *Starcraft II* games will focus on the Zerg, but it's the multiplayer that we'll get to experience first in an imminent beta. This should offer an opportunity to test Blizzard's careful tweaks to its immaculately balanced brand of space warfare.

WHORE OF THE ORIENT

Publisher Warner Bros | **Developer** Team Bondi
Format PC, next-gen consoles | **Origin** Australia | **Release** TBA



Team Bondi's first game after *LA Noire* has been confirmed for next-gen consoles, which is perhaps a sign that the studio is continuing to develop its games around high-end tech. The setting, 1930s Shanghai, is even more intriguing than post-war LA, though art so far suggests a similar hardboiled tone.

METRO: LAST LIGHT

Publisher THQ | **Developer** 4A Games
Format PC, PS3, 360 | **Origin** Ukraine | **Release** 2013



It had rough edges, but that didn't stop *Metro 2033* from offering some of the most atmospheric world building since *Half-Life 2*. *Last Light* is built around the same scavenging and shooting as its predecessor, but 4A Games' skill at bringing Dmitry Glukhovsky's world to life seems even more assured.

ARMY OF TWO: THE DEVIL'S CARTEL

Publisher EA | **Developer** Visceral Games
Format PS3, 360 | **Origin** US | **Release** March 2013



Just four years old and already being rebooted, EA's overhaul of its co-op shooter sees the outlandish leads dropped in favour of a more serious tone. Its gameplay remains cover-based and mostly unchanged, but the destructibility of *Cartel*'s levels stands out thanks to DICE's Frostbite engine.

BROKEN SWORD 5 – THE SERPENT'S CURSE

Publisher Revolution Software | **Developer** In-house
Format Mac, PC | **Origin** UK | **Release** TBA



Broken Sword 5, recently funded through Kickstarter, marks an end to Revolution's long-running series dabbling with 3D and a return to the 2D styles of the first two games. The premise is classic, too, with an ancient conspiracy threatening to end the world and drawing George and Nico together.

IRONCLAD TACTICS

Publisher Zachtronics Industries | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** US | **Release** 2013



After the inscrutable, abstract nature of puzzler *SpaceChem*, which fused chemical engineering with *Pipe Mania*, Zachtronics' next title has a slightly simpler, if no less unusual, premise. A strategy card game set during the American Civil War (or at least a version of it fought by robots), *Ironclad Tactics* aims to fuse card game strategy with the mechanics of an RTS. If it's anything like *SpaceChem*, those who do get to grips with its ruleset will be richly rewarded.



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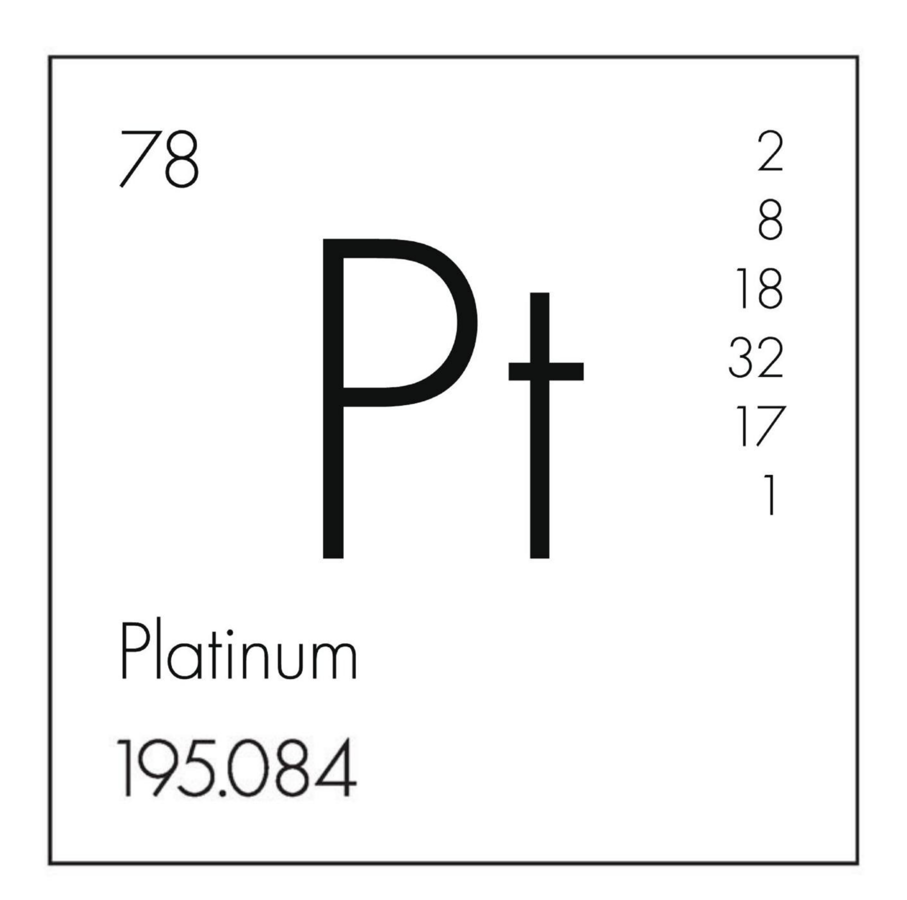
PLANETARY ANNIHILATION

Publisher Uber Entertainment | **Developer** In-house | **Format** Mac, PC | **Origin** US | **Release** TBA



If we're being pedantic about things, *Planetary Annihilation* would technically be a step backwards from *Total Annihilation*, just one of the RTS series that *Planetary*'s veteran leads have worked on. But it definitely doesn't look like it. The central premise sees battles taking place across entire solar systems, so you might use missile batteries placed on an asteroid belt to wipe out forces on a nearby planet, for instance. As well as adding scale and intriguing spatial considerations to a traditionally top-down genre, Uber Entertainment is promising a procedural planet creator that will aid players in building their own maps, too.





Five games in five years, with one **Edge** ten and counting. As its deal with Sega comes to an end, we chart the history and future of Platinum Games

One of the world's most magical stories gets underway when Charlie Bucket finds a golden ticket. This slip of paper contains the promise of secrets and wonders untold: a visit to Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. Charlie's thrill of anticipation at what lies behind those gates is palpable.

We're in Osaka, about to enter the Umeda Sky Building, and it feels like we're holding a platinum ticket. This is the home of Platinum Games, a studio that in just five short years has made some truly spectacular titles. But from the moment Platinum made its debut in the pages of **E**190, it's had to live with high expectations. Led by and made up of veterans of Capcom's short-lived Production Studio 4 and Clover Studios, Platinum formed with a collective CV full of classics, including *Okami*, *Devil May Cry*, *Viewtiful Joe*, *Resident Evil 4* and *God Hand*. Those founding developers took their independence seriously, and agreed to a five-game deal with Sega on one condition: the creative freedom to make the games they wanted to make. Five years and five games later, it's time to catch up.

Tatsuya Minami, president and CEO of Platinum, is finishing up some emails as we enter his glass-walled office, the only one on an otherwise open-plan development floor. **Atsushi Inaba**, Platinum's executive director and producer of all the studio's titles, is behind a nearby desk. Pretty soon, directors **Hideki Kamiya** and **Kenji Saito** (the Platinum up-and-comer in charge of *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*) have turned up for the photo shoot. **Masaki Yamanaka**, the director of *Anarchy Reigns* (AKA *Max Anarchy* in Japan) is the last to surface, wearing expensively distressed jeans and sandals – the latter immediately clocked by the eagle-eyed Inaba, who sends him off to put some shoes on.

Photos out of the way, it's time to talk about Platinum. "Our real goal for the first five years was simple," Inaba tells us, then leans forward, "stay around. Survive. That was it. Within five years, 80 per cent of companies fail, so being able to survive these years was the target."

"Five years ago, no one had heard of us," adds Minami, "so at the same time we wanted to build the company's reputation: for people to know [Platinum] make great games, and recognise the logo."

The company's desire for independence is frequently re-emphasised by Platinum's founders during the next couple of hours, reflecting the Japanese industry's ecosystem, which is dominated by big publisher-developers such as Capcom and Sega, and largely devoid of studios like, well, Platinum. "Many of us were from Clover Studios, although not me," says Minami, a Capcom producer at the time. "When Capcom decided to disband Clover Studios, or, should I say, they decided to leave, I was thinking of leaving myself. So I spoke to Mr Inaba, and we had a lot of options. We could have become an in-house studio for another publisher, but the best option was becoming independent."

"We never thought about the other companies seriously," clarifies Inaba. "If we were going to be in-house, we might as well have stayed at Capcom."

Two holding companies – ODD Inc. (Minami) and SEEDS Inc. (Inaba, Kamiya and Shinji Mikami) – merged to become Platinum Games in October 2007. Shortly afterwards, the Sega deal was announced, which seemed like a dream come true for both parties. Sega had a poor track record with new IP. Platinum Games wanted a publisher capable of taking its titles to a global market, and that promise of no interference. The relationship wouldn't turn out quite so simple, however.

> "The biggest problem with Infinite Space was when Sega undershipped it and it sold out!"

Platinum's debut game was *MadWorld*, a 2009 Wii exclusive that combined an unforgettable black-and-white visual style with over the top ultraviolence. It received an **Edge** six, falling at the low end of the scale, with an overall Metacritic score of 81. Sales were poor, too, serving as a stark warning to other third parties thinking about the Wii. *MadWorld* tanked.

"I don't think we'll ever see a black-and-white game like that again," says Inaba. "We might not even see that particular kind of ultraviolent game in that hardware situation again." It's a comment that gives some context to the friendlier style of *Project P-100* (working title), the upcoming Wii U game being directed by Kamiya.

MadWorld was swiftly followed by the most unusual Platinum title: *Infinite Space*, a co-development with Hifumi Kono and his studio, Nude Maker. The partnership dated back to *Steel Battalion*, a 2002 game designed by Kono and produced by Inaba that came with a famously elaborate controller. But where *Steel Battalion* externalised its world into a plastic cockpit that came with a £130 price tag, *Infinite Space* was a galaxy squeezed into a cartridge the size of a stamp for Nintendo's DS.

"The biggest problem with *Infinite Space*", says a laughing Inaba, "was when Sega undershipped the game and it sold out instantly! We lost the chance for a bunch of sales!" Inaba's only half-joking: *Infinite Space* sold 38,000 copies in its first week in Japan, then quickly tailed off. Released just under a year later in the west, it more or less sank without trace, eventually ending up with under 200,000 unit sales worldwide. ➜

01. Independence
Inaba believes Platinum must always retain its independence. "If we do that while becoming stronger, we'll be able to eliminate a lot of the things we don't want to do. There are times when a company has to do certain things just to survive, and I want us to be a place where our employees are never ever put into that situation"

02. The Umeda Sky Building
Platinum moved from the ninth to the eighth floor of the Sky Building in January 2012. One of Osaka's landmarks, it was mostly owned by Toshiba until 2008, and was initially planned as four towers connecting to form a 'city of air' before the design was scaled down to two towers

03. Interior design
Platinum's internal space is carefully choreographed – our interview takes place in the studio's 'Purple room', a conference room where the door and furnishings live up to the name. Alongside this are Blue, Red, Green, and Yellow conference rooms. There's also a substantial reference library

04. Figures and awards
Platinum HQ is full of figurines and merchandise from the studio's titles, as well as fan tributes and industry awards. The finest treasure trove, however, is laid out in neat rows behind the CEO's desk: Minami's truly impressive collection of boxed and mint condition Hot Wheels cars

05. Priority number one
"I don't really want to say this in a room full of game directors and producers," laughs Minami, "but Platinum's greatest failure has been our inability to keep to schedules. I don't see it as a terrible failing, because ultimately the end result is the best… There are other things to balance, but our number one priority is to make great games"


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06. Atsushi Inaba, executive director and producer
"How can I give you an idea of Mr Inaba?" muses Saito. "The first word is 'carrot'; the second word is 'stick'. And there aren't very many carrots. Mr Inaba is always making you push yourself, and right now, in my position, I certainly feel that. A few carrots and lots of sticks." Inaba himself then adds: "That is the correct balance"

07. Tatsuya Minami, president and CEO
Minami started working with Capcom in 1987, and by the time he left in 2006 he was head of its production studios. "Mr Minami is very broad-minded," says Inaba. "I'd almost say visionary. I guess I'd better balance that out… he's explosive, broad-minded and violent! Mr Minami is quick-tempered, but also quick to return to normal. A violent visionary!"

"Honestly, the reason that *Infinite Space* failed…" begins Inaba, before correcting himself. "It's not right to say that it failed, because from another angle this is actually its greatest success: during production the scenario kept getting bigger and bigger, and so the ROM size started getting bigger, and the schedule got stretched as we added more and more. But in the end that's what people loved about that game. So it's difficult to separate the success and failure of that title, because they're one and the same thing."

Kamiya knows the next question is probably going to be about *Bayonetta*, and he's clearly itching to get started. We are too: Platinum Games' debut on PS3 and 360 was also the game that earned the studio its first **Edge** ten, and it's the latest in the long list of gaming greats the director can credit to his name, including *Resident Evil 2*, *Devil May Cry*, *Viewtiful Joe* and *Okami*.

Indeed, one of Kamiya's past games looms large in *Bayonetta*'s background: *DMC*. Capcom's brawler was developed by a group nicknamed Team Little Devils, while *Bayonetta* was made by Team Little Angels. Why such a direct line? "When I think back to *Bayonetta*," says Kamiya, "*DMC* came out seven years beforehand. And within that time span, many action games were released. When those games came out, everyone compared them to *DMC*. And I was thinking, 'What? You're seriously comparing them to a game that's really old? This is what we can make now.'

"When we were making *DMC*, we didn't set out to make *DMC*," he continues. "We were supposed to make a *Resident Evil* game, but screwed it up. There were lots of things we wanted to do for an action game, but couldn't because of that legacy. With *Bayonetta* it was all fresh. We started by saying that we were going to make an action game, and this was how we were going to make it. Then we gunned it – all the engines at full blast. So in our heads that was a more complete development."

"The biggest failure for Platinum so far, the one that really sticks in my mind, is that [Bayonetta] port"

The only black mark against *Bayonetta* was the PS3 version, a port of Platinum's 360 code handled by an in-house Sega team. It did a wonderful game a disservice, particularly with regard to the framerate, and still rankles. "The biggest failure for Platinum so far, the one that really sticks in my mind, is that port," says Inaba. "At the time, we didn't really know how to develop on PS3 all that well, and whether we could have done it… is irrelevant: we made the decision that we couldn't. But looking back on the result, and especially what ended up being released to users, I regard that as our biggest failure.

"One thing I will say is that it wasn't a failure for nothing. We learned from that we needed to take responsibility for everything. So on *Vanquish* we developed both versions in-house. We learned, so it wasn't a pointless failure, but it was a failure nonetheless."

Vanquish, a thrilling thirdperson shooter, was directed by Shinji Mikami, one of Platinum's founding members. Following its release in 2010, Mikami left to establish his own studio, Tango Gameworks. "Mr Mikami always wanted to be his own man, and his own developer," explains Minami. "As one of the founding members of Production Studio 4 and Clover Studios, he felt a certain responsibility to all of the creators he had worked with up until that point. So when Clover disbanded and PG began, he made a commitment to those people to make a game with them, one of the first PG titles. And that's why and how he came to make *Vanquish*."

So it was always the plan that Mikami would leave when *Vanquish* was done? "We were always talking together about what would come next," says Minami. "He wanted to make his things in the environment of his choice, and create his own company. We were always talking to each other about that, and once *Vanquish* was finished that's what he went off and did. We're incredibly respectful of Mr Mikami, and admire his work very much."

The fifth and final game from Platinum to date, *Anarchy Reigns*, is already out in Japan, but has yet to be released in the west. It's the conclusion to the wider narrative of the studio's deal with Sega, the reality of that developer/publisher dream team and how it worked out. Over these five games, Platinum has delivered new IP with real style and quality. But did Sega deliver for Platinum? After the low sales of both *MadWorld* and *Infinite Space*, the publisher may have been wondering what it had let itself in for, but *Bayonetta* sold a respectable 1.35 million copies and *Vanquish* managed unit sales figures of over 800,000. Yet the latter is perhaps the most obviously undersold title in Platinum's line-up, having been released in October 2010, slap bang in the blockbuster window. It's a move that Sega may have come to regret.

The case of *Anarchy Reigns*, however, shows just how Platinum's relationship with Sega has changed. Released in Japan in early July, the fact that it is both region-free and defaulted to English suggests Platinum was half expecting to be let down when it came to a western release. Its fears may be warranted: Sega still hasn't confirmed a date beyond 'TBC'. Japanese sales haven't been great either. And an eventual western launch may not do much better, because a multiplayer arena battler seems unlikely to receive much of a push from the cash-strapped Sega.

We ask Masaki Yamanaka, *Anarchy Reigns*' director, how he feels about all this. "Well, it hasn't even been

on sale overseas. I mean, you ask me how it feels… I'm not going to say it feels good. It's saddening to see what happened. As developers, we're not the ones who put the game on sale. But we feel that we held up our end of the bargain in terms of quality. We think we've made a really good game, and reviews have largely reflected that."

Inaba interjects: "One of the things I've seen on Kamiya's Twitter, and a lot elsewhere, is users saying, 'Where was the marketing for this game?' I mean, that's what they're saying about the situation, not me. When people say that, it's not something we can affect, so we just have to apologise and there's nothing we can do."

Minami says, acknowledging Sega's own woes: "Publishers have lots of issues to consider when releasing a game, and perhaps we don't know every side of that."

With hindsight, did Platinum choose the right suitor? "I think it was great to team up with Sega at the time," Minami says. "And it is important to give them their due: we couldn't have made the games we did without them. There were certainly good parts and bad parts to the relationship. Perhaps they did not realise how good our games were. But overall it was the right thing to do."

As Minami talks, Inaba is smiling and Kamiya starts laughing. Why the smiles? "Am I smiling?" asks Inaba. "I didn't realise. There's no doubt that we are in Sega's debt for a few things. Thanks to Sega, we were able to grow as a company and we're pleased about that. So now it's time for us to do new things."

So far, Platinum are doing new things with Konami to make *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* and Nintendo to produce *Project P-100*. But the studio is also working on unannounced projects, and talking to western publishers as well as local ones. "We have a lot of talks and a lot of contact with western publishers who want to work with us," says Inaba. "I think they respect us and recognise what we can do. They always want to work on very action-oriented titles, because they think we're the best action game developers in the world." Minami adds: "Whenever we talk with western publishers, it's always about something with a very heavy action style to it. Nobody comes to Platinum and asks for an RPG."

It's an interesting time to be a developer of big-budget action games signing publishing deals, given that the global retail market for such titles is widely perceived to be in decline, being nibbled away by a combination of download, mobile, and social gaming. "I think if you view the Japanese market by itself, that's maybe the case," says Minami. "If you look more globally, I don't necessarily think it's that bad. We do a lot of research on our own, combining both packaged and download games, and we don't think the so-called '$60 triple-A' market is going to collapse and fall away. Social games and smaller games are obviously doing really well, but that doesn't mean that the big things are going to go away."

Some might say that the problem is the big things are getting ever bigger, with even a mid-range console title requiring vast resources. When Platinum was announced, the company employed about 50 staff. And now? "Right now, we have 150 people," says Minami, "and plus contractors brings it to about 200."

"We've got a lot!" agrees Inaba. "There's actually a lot of people working in the company I've never had a sit-down chat with, which I find odd."

Kamiya, the picture of innocence, asks: "Aren't we actually bigger now than Capcom Production Studio 4 was at its peak?" And Minami confirms it: "Yeah, there was about 120 people there, so we're bigger now." Kamiya sits back, smiling.

That may be a lot of employees, but Platinum is always working on multiple projects. It's not uncommon for several hundred staff to be working on a single game at publishers such as Ubisoft, and Capcom recently floated the number 600 with reference to *Resident Evil 6* (although the core team size is around 150). How can Platinum stay relatively lean and still compete at the top end? "The thing with big publisher-developers like that is that it's very easy to add and take away people from a project," says Inaba. "One day, you look around and suddenly there's hundreds of people working on something, and you're not quite sure where they all came from. I don't know if it's right to say we're lean per se, but I do think an important thing for an independent developer like us is to be on the edge of starving. I mean, you run the company like you're in danger of starving the whole time, and that's the right way to do it."

"Run the company like you're in danger of starving the whole time, and that's the right way to do it"

Kamiya has a somewhat more pointed take: "I heard that there were a huge amount of people working on *Devil May Cry 4*, just an enormous amount of people. Didn't help them, did it? When I think about that, it's amazing the number of people we made *Bayonetta* with."

Finally, Minami smooths things over: "The point is that Capcom have the resources to employ 600 people, so good luck to them."

One thing Platinum's leads do share with their old employer is an ambition to be globally successful, rather than making games for the Japanese audience alone. "I don't think we could say our sales have been a breakthrough success," says Minami, "but if you look at them, the balance has been much more towards western sales than Japanese sales. There's a lot of Japanese developers that look only at the home market and make

08. MadWorld
"It annoys me when people call *MadWorld*'s comic book style American," says Yamanaka, its art director, "because it's definitely a Japanese twist on that visual style, and I think we did a great job with it. One of the ways we succeeded was in creating something interesting on the Wii that didn't exist before"

09. Infinite Space
Released in June 2009 in Japan, there still isn't anything quite like *Infinite Space*. It's a sci-fi SRPG that unfolds into a huge universe of crisscrossing dilemmas with a wicked sense of humour. Co-developer Nude Maker was formed from veterans of Human Entertainment, a now-defunct studio responsible for series such as *Clock Tower* and *Fire Pro Wrestling*

10. Bayonetta
We ask Kamiya if the only thing wrong with *Bayonetta* was the PS3 version, and he cracks a big grin and answers in English: "Exactly!" Fans of the witch should visit www.platinumgames.com, where an outstanding ongoing series of developer commentaries hit its 52nd episode as of May this year

11. Vanquish
"I think *Vanquish* was really polished and of a super high quality; the team did very well," says Inaba. "We know people wanted it to have online, but we were trying to do something new by putting heavy action elements into a shooter, and online would have been biting off a hell of a lot of new things at once. More than we could chew…"

12. Max Anarchy/Anarchy Reigns
Of its multiplayer brawler, Platinum announced back in May that "Sega has decided to change the [US/EU release] date to TBC. While our work on the game is finished, localised, and ready to go, as publisher, Sega gets to make the final decision as to when it is released." You sense there's not a little sadness to read between those lines



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13. Kenji Saito, director
Saito was lead programmer on *Bayonetta*, and is now the director of *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*. "I've never worked on a team with Saito, so I can't tell you exactly what he's like," says Yamanaka. "But he has lots of kids, so he had a lot of sex when he was younger. And *Rising* looks like it's a really hard game to make, so I admire his hard work there!"

14. Masaki Yamanaka, director
Yamanaka's first credit came on *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis*, and he worked on Mikami's team for *Resi 4* and *God Hand*. He was responsible for *MadWorld*'s striking visual style, before taking on his first director role for the recently shipped *Anarchy Reigns*. Or, as Kamiya puts it with his sly grin, he's "surprisingly interesting"

15. Hideki Kamiya, director
"The first thing about Kamiya is that he's on Twitter too much," Minami says. "He also watches too much Nico Nico [Japan's YouTube equivalent]. But despite both of those terrible traits, he is actually very good at his job. He certainly does the work, I'm just not sure about when… But it's always good in the end, so I'm happy"

games for it. This can work well: *Monster Hunter*, for example. But you have to look at the worldwide market, because thinking you can just get away with focusing on Japan isn't going to work any more."

The health of the Japanese industry itself is frequently questioned in the western media for such reasons. Are things as bad as they're sometimes made out to be? Minami prompts Kenji Saito, who's been quiet until now, to speak up. "I don't really think there's a need to be down on Japanese games in general," says the director of *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*. "Platinum is a company that is trying to push to the front and do big things. But I think it's true that some Japanese developers are still making Japanese games, and trying to maintain their status quos – that's their whole strategy."

Inaba interrupts: "They're falling behind then, right?" The fiery producer has little time for vague generalities, especially ones that might include Platinum. "I don't like it when people lump Japanese developers all together into one group. Frankly, I think it's a joke. What do these people know? Think about western developers. There are many western developers making terrible games, and then you see one like Infinity Ward making a game that sells 20 million and everyone goes, 'Hey, western developers are amazing!' There are tons of terrible western developers, just like there's tons of terrible Japanese developers. To lump studios together in great masses misses the point."

"If people want realistic games, then the Japanese style has to move towards it. There's a lot we can learn"

Kamiya does see a divide, one born of technology that finally delivers on a design philosophy. "I think what's happened is that western games have always been trying to approach realism. Western gamers like this realistic style. And up until the current generation of hardware, they haven't really been able to do that very well. Now you can execute that creative vision, and that's why you've seen such an explosion of successful western games.

"If the trend for gaming is to make these more 'realistic' experiences, then I don't think Japanese games suddenly became bad. What happened is that Japanese games met the fate that was going to happen. Because if people want realistic games, then the Japanese style has to move towards it. I think there's a lot we can learn from western developers about how they've grown into realism, and how their techniques have developed in that style."

Some might say Platinum already has. The release of *Anarchy Reigns* puts the seal on the developer's first incarnation, a period marked by five games that occasionally share a genre, but in every important respect are almost nothing alike. And the future? There couldn't have been a better pick to rescue *Revengeance* from Konami's doldrums, turning a quirky tech demo into the kind of inventive action-slasher that looks like it could get Michael Bay wetting himself. Kamiya's current game, meanwhile, is *Project P-100*, a kind of superhero take on *Pikmin* that makes inventive use of the Wii U controller.

"It consumes me," says Kamiya. "When I make a game, I put everything I have into it. Nothing is left on the table. Just because I've made something good in the past is no guarantee that anything I make in the future is going to be good. Every time it has to be that same level of effort, which is everything. I just pray I can continue to make great games."

Kamiya clasps his hands and begins gazing at the ceiling, a source of amusement to his colleagues. A tickled Minami asks: "Are you wishing upon a star Kamiya-san?"

"That's all you can do, right?" Kamiya smiles. "You hope the gaming gods come down and bless you with a great idea so you can continue to make great games. The whole point of being a director is to make a great game. If you can't do that, then there's no point. So if that day ever comes for me, I hope Mr Minami and Platinum will create a post where I can just sit around all day and rubberstamp things. If I can't make great games any more, they better make a job for me or I'll be out of money."

Minami begins thinking aloud about whether Platinum needs manual labourers. "Come back on the tenth anniversary to see what they have done to me!" pleads Kamiya. "I'll either be responsible for more great games or the mailman!"

Where will Platinum be on that tenth anniversary? What targets does the studio have now it's survived its early years? "What I want personally is something I have to do: I want to continue producing games," says Inaba. "But I'm starting to realise I can't produce everything myself. So my role for the future is now to help develop really good producers here at Platinum. As far as the company [goes], I think we're close to it, but I want to make this an amazing place to make games, somewhere people really enjoy making games."

As for how Platinum is viewed from outside, he has a clear objective. "I want our position in the industry to be something that inspires other independent developers when they look at what we're making, and how we constantly push and try to expand our boundaries. Being both a great place and a fun place to make games isn't easy – there's a lot of nuances to achieving that."

Minami makes that nuanced future, one without the Sega meal ticket, sound simple: "I'm no longer a developer, and I'm not even producing games directly any more, so basically my personal targets and what I want the company to do are the same thing. What I really hope our staff, and the company as a whole, does is simple: never make a game that people don't like." ■

AN AUDIENCE WITH...

ERIC HIRSHBERG

The CEO of Activision Publishing tells us why the best thing his company ever did was to start saying 'no'



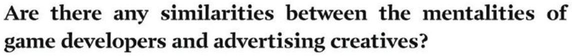
"I think we have a unique are discerning, and say no really get behind the things

Eric Hirshberg left his role as chief creative officer and co-CEO of advertising agency Deutsch LA in 2010 to start as the CEO of Activision Publishing. "I didn't want to not try something that could be so transformational; not many people get to change careers 20 years in and try something new," he says regarding the move, which surprised both the advertising world and the game industry, since in the latter executives tend to rise through its own ranks. But this is Activision, the behemoth that does things differently, intently focusing on a few hit series while its competitors spread their nets in an attempt to keep up with games' rapid evolution. We discuss his creative perspective, how he's developing Activision's future blockbusters and the benefits of saying 'no'.



CV

Eric Hirshberg is an art school graduate rather than, like so many other game industry CEOs, an MBA holder. But he cut his executive teeth running the multimillion dollar ad agency Deutsch LA, where he was also CCO, and helped create campaigns for Sony and HTC.



Are there any similarities between the mentalities of game developers and advertising creatives?

I find them remarkably similar – if you replace the nouns, a lot of the conversation sounds strikingly similar. In any commercial creative business there are the same struggles: people want to innovate, to do something new, to be admired. People also want to do something commercially relevant that finds a large audience. There are the same discussions when people want to do a great Superbowl commercial and when they're trying to make the next blockbuster videogame: how do we innovate? How do we balance that with ideas that we know are commercial and viable?

How did you find the switch between ad agency projects that take weeks and game projects that take years?

That's probably the biggest difference. It's been thrilling – obviously it brings with it increased pressure and increased stakes. For me to be involved with something like the birth and development of *Skylanders*, for example; it's been wonderful seeing that come to life, and all our collective efforts with [developer] Toys For Bob. Polishing and improving the game and characters, building the brand and the mythology, figuring out how to market it and making it a phenomenon with kids, watching that unfold and become the biggest game of the year so far in the US and Europe is incredibly gratifying. I think [the timescale]'s probably the biggest difference, but it's one I really like. You get to own and participate in the whole package – everything from the fundamental concept itself to how it's packaged and hangs on the peg in the retailer, and everything in between. That's a big responsibility, and a big art.

Activision concentrates on a few huge properties. Do you see *Skylanders* as the model you'd want to apply to most new game IPs?

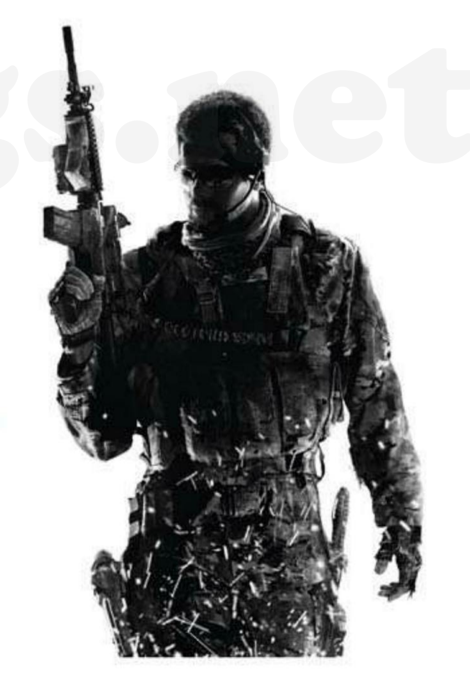
I certainly hope so. I think that *Skylanders* has all the things we look for in terms of where to make the big bets. *Skylanders* raised a lot of eyebrows before it was out in the world. We had a lot of questions a year ago, like: "Why are you getting into the kids' market when other developers are getting out of it?" and "Isn't this dependent on the Wii, which is at the end of its cycle – and is it selling at same clip as few years ago?" People saw a lot of risk in this, but what we saw in the way kids responded in playtesting every time they brought a toy to life was something magical; we knew we had something nuclear in that idea. That's what emboldened us to put that amount of capital and creativity and human resourcing behind that idea, because we knew we had something that didn't exist elsewhere in the marketplace. We wanted to make sure that the idea reached the potential that it had. Of course, all's well that ends well... The fact that it's going well makes all those decisions seem like they were risks worth taking.

Are you actively researching and developing new, similarly sized franchises all the time to find that next *Call Of Duty* or *Skylanders*?

Yes, we're always looking for what we think can be the next big idea, both inside and outside [of Activision], and we have what I think are a number of bold initiatives already announced, whether that be bringing *Call Of Duty* to the Chinese gaming market, or launching the new IP from Bungie, one of the world's most capable developers. *Skylanders* and things like *Call Of Duty*, these are all things that have a lot of innovation and a lot of risk, and in many cases introduce new play patterns and ideas into the market.

I think we have a unique strategy in that we're discerning, and say no to a lot of things in order to really get behind the things we do decide to do. I think that's different from most

strategy in that we to a lot of things to we do decide to do"



Modern Warfare 3 grossed $1 billion in worldwide sales in its first 16 days on sale, a success that's in part down to Activision's policy of focusing on just a few properties

other game publishers, and also the way entertainment companies have historically been run. There's always been an element of spreading chips around the table, whether that's running a record company or a movie studio. You hope one of them turns into Avatar or Lady Gaga.

We tend to take a different approach, one inspired by gamers – they're spending more and more time with fewer and fewer franchises, wanting to go deeper into the world they inhabit. We've seen it with *Call Of Duty*, we've seen it with *Skylanders*, and certainly our friends at Blizzard have seen it with their games. It's a good approach, and causes you to step back and say, 'Is it great? Is it new? Is it different? Is it something no one else is doing; that no one else could do as well as we could?' It makes you ask those tough questions as opposed to just saying, 'Hey, we should compete in every category, have an entry in every genre.' I think it's more fun – it's harder, the stakes are higher, but the rewards are greater.

Free-to-play is rapidly becoming viewed as the dominant business model for games, but Activision hasn't really seemed to take it on. Why is that?

We're making a big investment in a free-to-play version of *Call Of Duty* in the biggest free-to-play marketplace: China. We've shown some appetite for experimenting with this format and making it successful with one of our biggest franchises. It's an exciting new development and business model, and has shown meaningful appeal.

That said, I think there's a tendency in moments of disruption – again, I don't think this is industry-specific – to assume that everything that's new will destroy what came before. In many cases, the new thing creates a new marketplace and new demand, and then some entrenched and mature markets show remarkable staying power. There wasn't a day I worked in advertising [that] I didn't hear about the death of the 30-second TV commercial. Originally, the VCR was going to kill it [laughs], then the Internet was going to kill it, the DVR was going to, satellite TV – because people had too many choices. It's proved to be a resilient medium that's still relevant today, but things like the Internet, mobile phones and social networks have added new tools and new ways to communicate with people, so they didn't destroy what came before, but made the toolbox stronger.

There are a lot of similarities between what I experienced in the advertising business and what's going on in gaming now. People tend to focus on the competition from new technologies and play patterns as opposed to the creative opportunities, which is what I tend to focus on. I think Activision, long before I got here, had shown itself to be an adaptable company when it comes to responding to new things and changes in its ability to both adapt and to pick the right bets. I have confidence we'll continue to be able to do that, but also excitement about what things like the fact there are now hundreds of millions of people with a smartphone in their pocket to play games on [will] allow us to do.

Some of the biggest properties today have come from small origins. Do you fear missing opportunities?

First of all, I'd say that there's more than one way to skin a cat, and there's more than one legitimate and worthwhile strategy. Doing a lot of small things and waiting to see which popcorns pop in the pan is a strategy that's been tried and true in a lot of different entertainment genres for a long time. So I don't want to comment on other people's strategies – you'd have to ask them how it's going for them. I would say that we have shown over a number of years that there's also validity to the idea of really picking your bets, and making sure that once you do, you support them in every possible way, and put every ounce of financial and human capital, of creativity, and of support into making them successful.

I think it takes boldness to feel, 'We know this one has potential', and then you go execute it. I think that's a valid strategy, and to an extent I'd give the opinion that people see false security in a wide slate. If you look at the entertainment and creative companies out there experiencing the most success, they seem to be the ones that focus and do a few things very well. I think it's true inside the gaming business and outside of it, too. It's true of Apple; it's true of Pixar.

In the gaming business, who's an example of that?

I think Rockstar and Blizzard are good examples; we're a good example, too. As I said, though, there are other legitimate ways to approach the business, which I also respect. I'm just pointing out the ones where I feel there are similarities in doing a few things exceptionally well. ■

YOUNG BUCKS

With vast spending power and keenly discerning eyes, children are transforming gaming. We chart the trends shaping the next generation

Their fingers may be stubby, but children seem preternaturally adept at grasping the true function of new technology: games. If you've seen parents taking their young children out for a meal lately, you'll probably have witnessed the child's inevitable request for a smartphone to play on. Maybe you've also heard them utter the cry of a generation: "It's only 69p!" Or perhaps they've simply demanded an App Store password.

No longer restricted to a brief spell of pestering outside a local game shop, children's access to games is now untrammelled, whether at home on browsers, or out and about via smartphone marketplaces. And this means that our kids are quietly reshaping the entire entertainment industry right under our noses.

Of course, given our medium's history, it wouldn't be remiss to expect the driving force behind industry shifts to be men aged 16-34. And yet, according to entertainment consulting company KZero, the single biggest group purchasing virtual goods is children under the age of 15. At the same time, the growth in virtual goods revenue is skyrocketing, rising from $0.9 billion in 2007 to $9 billon in 2011. This year alone, it's estimated that kids could end up spending a staggering $7 billion on virtual items. At least they can't leave them lying all over the floor.

"The majority of new mass-market kids IPs will begin life as games, then port over to other media channels"

It's not just virtual items that kids are driving sales of either. While there's no hard data on exactly how many units of *Angry Birds* were purchased by children aged ten and under, it's a vast number if the sales of merchandise are anything to go by.

The important point to take from all of this is that we're witnessing something new. Today's under-13 market reflects a seismic shift in consumption patterns, perhaps the biggest since TV adverts started to be aimed at children. We've raised a generation that's more demanding, and discerning, than ever before. Today's youth have had access to touchscreen devices for most of their lives, and Internet access has been pervasive for them. Immediate purchasing systems, such as the App Store, have eroded the concept of delayed gratification.

The impact of this is reverberating well beyond the game industry. Toy companies such as Mattel are facing the prospect of their market being turned upside down. Twenty years ago, the likes of Optimus Prime and Barbie were designed by adult professionals. Now new brands are being generated from the ground up as online games fuelled by the under-13 audience create new demand.

"It would be fair to say [kids' games] have rejuvenated these industries," says **John Leonhardt**, president of the Dimensional Branding Group. "Manufacturers will continue to rely on certain tentpole franchise makers like Marvel and Pixar, but they've moved away from feature films as the sole source of new properties for consumer products."

This transition from games to toy brands has happened rapidly. Widely regarded as having written the blueprint for the transmedia strategy, *Moshi Monsters* had some of the bestselling toys at UK retail during Christmas 2011. Last year, *Stardoll* launched its own clothing range with US retailer JC Penney. According to the Wall Street Journal, Rovio is set to sell $400 million worth of plush toys based on *Angry Birds* in 2012 – double what it sold last year.

Then there are the games on the path to ascendancy, such as *Fight My Monster*. A digital trading card game started by two guys in a garden shed in England, it was courted by major licensing groups before signing with Striker Entertainment. The company is now based in Silicon Valley and has over 1.5 million users.

"Gaming for kids, on all platforms, has become a new source of unique and fresh character-based properties," Leonhardt continues. "*Angry Birds*, *Skylanders* and *Temple Run* have huge kid fan bases, and the toy isles of Toys R Us, Target and Walmart will reflect that this Christmas. T-shirt companies and toy companies are clamouring for these type of brands."

Once the creative masters of their world, traditional toy companies are now having to react to such interlopers. Interactions are mostly still in the form of merchandising deals at the moment, but a wave of acquisitions seems likely. Indeed, Saban Brands, the owner of Power Rangers, announced its acquisition of *Zombie Farm* creators The Playforge in August. Meanwhile, **Nic Mitham**, CEO of KZero, believes that "the majority of new mass-market kids IPs will begin life as games, then port over to other media channels".

The size and influence of kids' gaming raises the question of why major social publishers seemingly haven't embraced the trend yet. "Social game companies do not have direct access to the kids market [because], primarily, Facebook can't reach these younger gamers," says Mitham. "Social gaming companies are heavily reliant on leveraging the Facebook social graph and exploiting push mechanics, email, messaging, etcetera. [The kids market requires] a totally different mindset, and requires much more agile marketing and user profiling."

So how are kids sharing new games? "Kids flock to sites based heavily on peer recommendations," Mitham explains. "They have low loyalty to games until they find one they like, or their friends like."

An additional barrier to entry for many games companies is the legal landscape. The nature of legislation such as the US's Child Online Privacy and Protection Act (COPPA) make it a difficult place to begin as a startup.

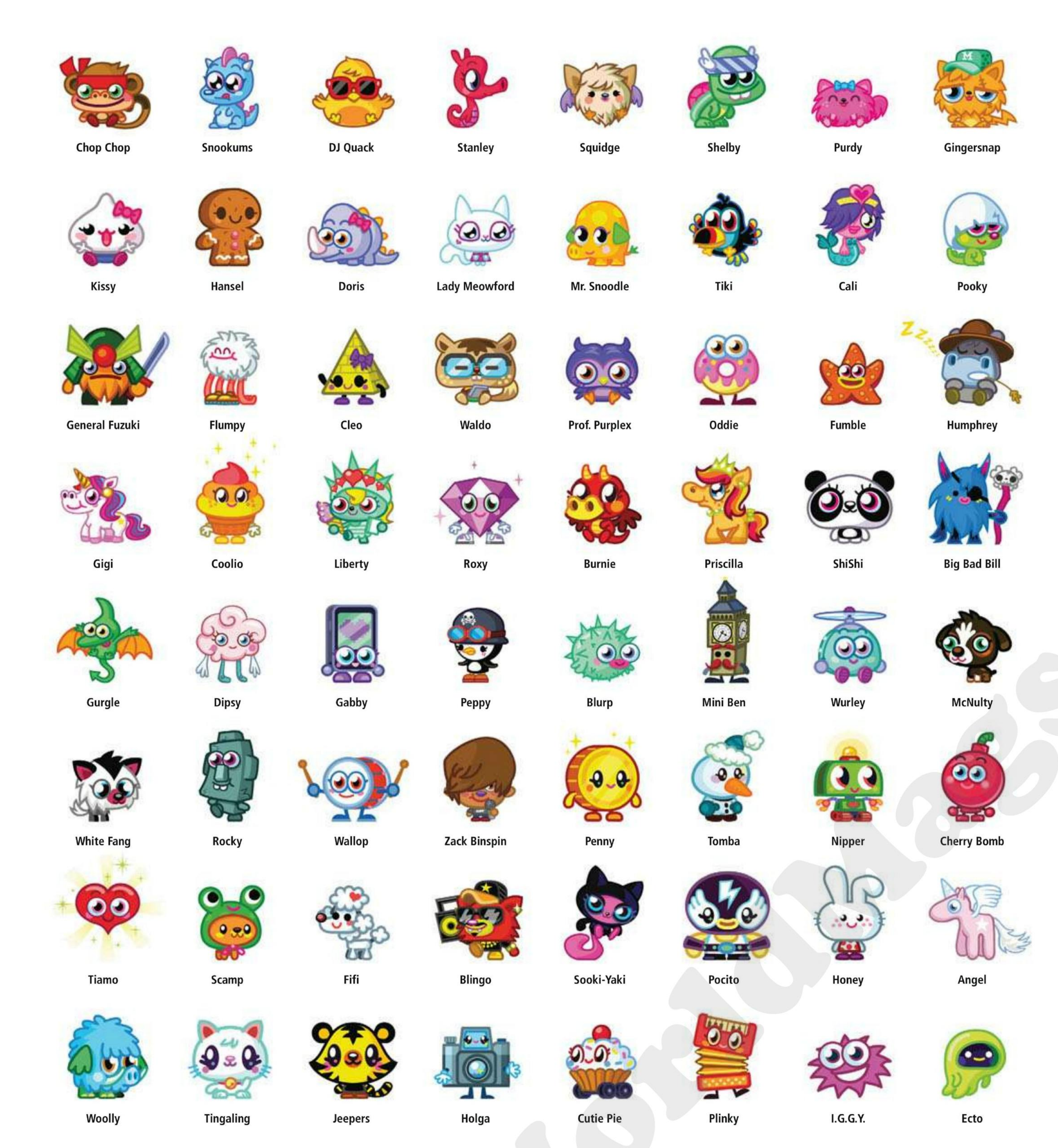






FROM TOP **Rovio's *Angry Birds* has capitalised on its popularity among kids with merchandising; *Moshi Monsters*' online world is packed with games as well as colourful characters; *Skylanders* figurines interact with its game world, adding new content**

BELOW Meet the Moshlings, tiny creatures for Moshi Monsters to catch and then admire in a zoo. Some of their designs even pay homage to celebrities and places



BELOW *Skylanders* toys are divided into eight different elemental types, and store game-related information in chips in their bases. More are due when the *Giants* expansion arrives in October



Spyro | Sunburn | Zook | Voodoo | Cynder | Bash

Ignitor | Chop Chop | Flameslinger | Slam-Bam | Trigger Happy | Dino-Rang

Camo | Boomer | Warnado | Eruptor | Drill Sergeant | Stealth Elf

Whirlwind | Stump Smash | Sonic Boom | Zap | Prism Break | Hex

Terrafin | Wham Shell | Wrecking Ball | Double Trouble | Gill Grunt | Drobot

Yet from the companies that have forged into the space, some surprisingly old-school marketing strategies are emerging. TV is frequently referenced by *Moshi Monsters* maker Mind Candy as helping fuel its early growth, an approach now copied by many of its competitors (including *Bin Weevils*). Online video has also become a huge driver for game discovery. Outfit7's Talking Friends series of apps has used online video to phenomenal effect, with over half a million videos uploaded to YouTube by its players.

Perhaps an old-school approach is fitting, given that kids generally aren't technology early adopters. Until now, most major successes in the sector have been browser-based. Currently, the biggest kids' games in the UK (*Moshi Monsters*, *Bin Weevils*, *Fight My Monster*) are built mostly on Flash. It would be wrong to suggest, however, that mobile companies have ignored the under-13 category. With success stories such as Talking Friends (Outfit7) and *MyHorse* (NaturalMotion), it's clear that brands are being originated on this platform as well. And as parents will testify, an iPad makes a welcome portable playmate.

Indeed, a study released by consultancy firm Dubit in August showed that 71 per cent of 6 to 11-year-old kids are now playing mobile games. Although the average spend is only a third of that on toys, we can expect more growth.

But perhaps the most exciting trend is towards kids becoming developers in their own right. **Dylan Collins**, chairman of Fight My Monster Ltd, says: "The next Disney is going to be a company that can produce really amazing content, but also one that can develop tools for kids to create their own. At some point in the near future, you're going to see the first 15-year-old millionaire being created – [teenagers] now have the tools and frameworks to create their own games, apps and movies."

"I think the next Notch will be younger. Now kids can put things online with the click of a mouse"

Jordan Casey is 12 and lives in Waterford, Ireland. He's also among the youngest iOS developers in Europe. In 2011, he released *Alien Ball Vs Humans*, using the GameSalad engine. But he is not alone. Search out Thomas Suarez and Harry Moran online and you'll see just how much young game development talent is out there. How long until kids are rejecting offerings from Activision and Popcap in favour of their own creations?

"It depends on if it's fun," says Casey. "I've played tons of kids' games that I think are way better than games made by big companies. Nobody knew kids could do this. But now with [coding initiatives like] Coder Dojo, I think [publishers] will be on the lookout. I think the next Notch will definitely be younger. Now kids can put things online with the click of a mouse."

Even for kids who aren't interested in developing their own games outright, younger gamers are embracing the idea of user-generated content in a big way. *Roblox*, an online playground that allows its users to create their own games, recently hired a 19-year-old player whose designs had been played over 10 million times.

So not only do console publishers now have to contend with iOS and social gaming, but it's clear they're facing dramatically different consumption patterns from this new generation of players. Still, there are success stories here too. For instance, Activision Blizzard's *Skylanders* product range has been a runaway success (find out more on p76) – but few others would have the alleged $50 million budget used to establish its market position.

Games retailers continue to insist they're keeping calm and carrying on, too. In a recent interview with the Financial Times, GameStop CEO **Paul Raines** said that stores will be around for a long time because they are "a place to go for a community of gamers to talk about and discover games". However, anyone who has kids will tell you that the school playground is where they discover new games. With the convenience of the various app stores, Steam and more, it's hard to see how physical retail will play a major part in their gaming life as they get older. It seems that Game's recent demise and rebirth into a much smaller company is likely to be the reality for GameStop as well.

Finally, this generation of kids is probably going to have the most demanding set of usability expectations yet. With the increasing power and availability of game engines, the point of difference becomes interface. "Hand and body gesture controls, speech controls and touch screen interfaces are becoming a fundamental part of UI design in all parts of the game industry," says **Jonathan Ball**, director of Pokedstudio. "I have a hard time getting my five-year-old daughter to use a keyboard; she always wants to touch the screen and expects things to move when she 'drags' them. This generation only knows touchscreen interfaces, and designers need to build an understanding of how to work this best into games and user experiences, rather than it being an afterthought."

Given the disproportionate impact that kids' gaming is having on the wider entertainment industry, there's a good argument to be made that this is far more strategically valuable than the currently in fashion 'mid-core' sector. "Kids' gaming is something of a holy grail," says Dylan Collins. "It occupies the intersection of games, TV, toys and online video, while also generating revenue from both physical and virtual items. But at the same time, the games they're playing today are reshaping their future play and consumption patterns. It's going to be pretty disruptive when they get older." ■



GAME DESIGN FOR KIDS

Fight My Monster is the fastest growing online game for boys in the UK. "With kids' games, you really have to forget everything you've learned from social gaming," says Dylan Collins. "Kids are far smarter than they're given credit for. A huge part of success here is actually creating a fun game. You can't put everything on rails. Kids will just ignore it."

So what makes a good kids' game, then? Founder/CEO **Dominic Williams** has gleaned some wisdom from the process. "Make everything a game," he says. "*Fight My Monster*'s registration process was designed to be a game in itself… Visuals are incredibly important. Many games fail in this market because they think that mechanics are more important than aesthetics. In reality, they're both a priority. And be funny. There's not enough humour in games. If you can make a kid laugh, you've got a friend for life."



REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Sound Shapes Vita
Campaign completed, we head to the Community section to see what players have created – a recent update has greatly improved discoverability so the cream rises. *Sound Shapes* is built on three pillars – music, platforming and visual design – and few player-created levels hit all three. Most, in fact, are visually striking, punishingly difficult and musically lukewarm, but there's potential here, and the campaign – Beck's 'album' especially – is endlessly replayable.

Sleeping Dogs 360, PC, PS3
Wei Shen is as much superhero as undercover cop, able to bound about the beautifully rendered alleys and avenues of Hong Kong, breaking faces and burning rubber with cruel efficiency and welcome accessibility. There are subtleties to the fighting, too, allowing you to graduate from messy to master with a few sessions of dojo training. Then it's out to the street to pummel and pillage like a good, bad cop.

Galaxy On Fire 2 HD iOS
Calling it *Elite* for iPad would be going too far. This is more like 2003 PC game *Freelancer* for iPad – not having to match rotation rates with space stations gives it the accessibility of Digital Anvil's game while retaining the core of Braben's. The HD makeover gives such stunning backdrops, with ringed planets and glowing nebulae contrasting against the blackness, that we can forgive the occasional framerate drop.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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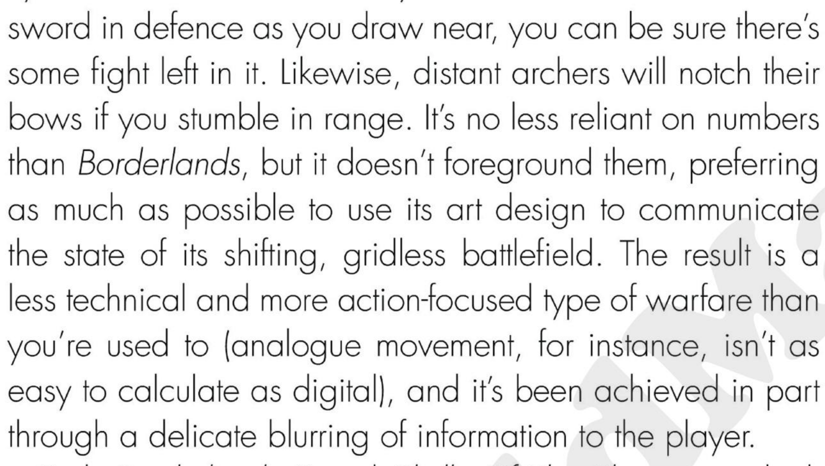


In the information economy, communication is key

Spray an enemy with bullets in *Borderlands 2* (p88) and you'll get burst of numbers emerging from your victim's body, alongside the arterial spurt. It's a fitting visual signature for a game that fuses the FPS and RPG, but it's also a reliable indicator of the efficacy of your brand new explosive assault rifle.

Borderlands 2 is built on such numbers and works hard to communicate them to players effectively. It doesn't always succeed. You'll often have to dig through your backpack to compare your unequipped stock to a new find, for instance, but *Borderlands 2*, more so than the first game, ensures that you're always equipped with the information you need. *Guild Wars 2* (p92) is similarly up-front about its stat crunching – as its reams of menu and inventory screens prove, lending you the necessary feedback for planning your character's development.

Skulls Of The Shogun (p96), meanwhile, tries to convey game-critical information more subtly. Will a unit counter-attack your blow? If a soldier raises its sword in defence as you draw near, you can be sure there's some fight left in it. Likewise, distant archers will notch their bows if you stumble in range. It's no less reliant on numbers than *Borderlands*, but it doesn't foreground them, preferring as much as possible to use its art design to communicate the state of its shifting, gridless battlefield. The result is a less technical and more action-focused type of warfare than you're used to (analogue movement, for instance, isn't as easy to calculate as digital), and it's been achieved in part through a delicate blurring of information to the player.





Both *Borderlands 2* and *Skulls Of The Shogun* are built on choices – which gun to grab, which unit to move. They may differ in how well-informed they want players to be, but they understand the importance of conveying (or tactically withholding) that information in the first place.

Borderlands 2

We stand victorious after another battle, ammo, cash and bodies littering the ground. Yet we can't deny that we feel a little sad. Before us lies a Loaded Widow Maker. With ten rounds per clip and a damage rating of 226, it's definably better than our beloved Dastardly Revolver, a seven-shooter with a rating of 139. But, firing as fast as we can pull the trigger, that Dastardly Revolver has loyally dropped tens of bandits for us in showers of damage points. Can we really come to love the Widow Maker as much? We compare the reload time, fire rate and accuracy, and it's slightly lower in all respects – enough to allow us to entertain the idea that we might spurn the new gun.

Decisions of the mind and heart are the crux of *Borderlands*, the FPS-cum-RPG that has possibly the greatest practical understanding of what makes a great shooter: guns. And by 'guns', we mean the interplay between a lot of different parameters, each of which both Gearbox and you explore in the 'bazillions' of guns in *Borderlands 2*. There are the basics – accuracy, fire rate, reload time, clip size, and damage output – but there's a lot more besides. What's the speed of bullet travel? Do you like the reticle, or does it aim into iron sights? What's your peripheral vision like when aiming, and how's the zoom? What's its kickback like? How many rounds does it consume per shot? And that's before considering the five types of elemental bonuses. You might also care what it looks and sounds like, from the boom and cast metal of the Jakobs range to the fizz and colourful sheen of Hyperion arms.

And you'll need to think hard about guns, because *Borderlands* throws a lot of things at you to shoot. In the thick of combat, *Borderlands* is like *Robotron: 2084* – it's about juggling threats, and about movement and precise shooting, whether at long range or short. *Borderlands* is most certainly not about using static cover to make slow, inexorable progress across its stages. And, yes, it's also like *Diablo* in terms of progressing your character through skill trees and gathering sackfuls of shiny loot.

Much of this was in the original, of course. To say this sequel stays true to it would be an understatement, one underscored in an opening sequence with the four player characters riding a train – as opposed to a bus. And while none of the main characters is the same, they closely resemble their forerunners. The turret-planting Commando is a new take on the Soldier. The Siren returns, but with Phasewalk replaced by Phaselock, a more offensive trick that lifts and holds an enemy in an energy bubble for a few seconds. The Gunzerker is an adaptation of the Berzerker, trading fists for dual-wielded guns. And the Assassin cherry picks talents from the original classes – his Deception ability, which sends out a decoy to distract enemies, is reminiscent of Phasewalking, but his skill trees specialise in sniping (like the Hunter), and melee (like the Berzerker).

Publisher 2K Games
Developer Gearbox Software
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now

While combat in the first game was often at long range and relatively static, it's become a lot more personal in this sequel

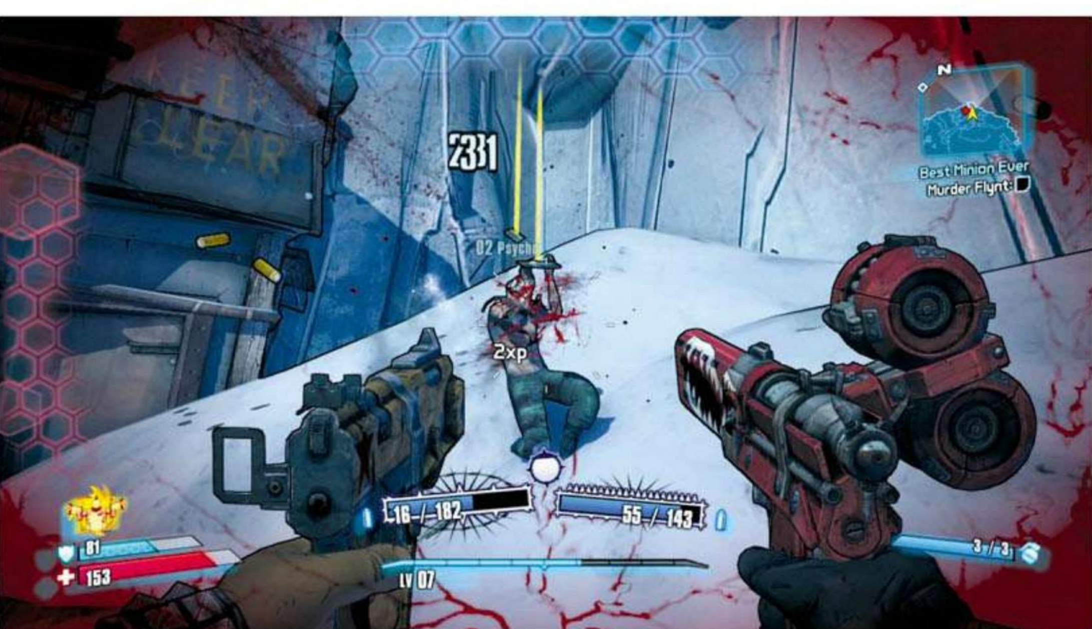


It's a well-rounded selection, but the classes are also less deterministic than they were before. They do less to steer your choice of weapon through skill bonuses for specific gun types, a decision that does much to expand your options and freedom. Each character also feels as at home taking on a crowd from a distance as up close, albeit at the risk of making them feel less defined. Indeed, until they're maxed out, each of their three skill trees does little to develop deep differences in the way you play the classes. With the Siren, you'll choose between broad sets of skills that focus on shield recharging and movement speed, health regeneration, or elemental damage dealing. But finding a powerful new shotgun is far more likely to cause you to change from a ranged strategy to close-quarters combat than any skill.

The effect is compounded by the sheer range of buffs and stat tweaks you can apply to your character to tune them. You can upgrade your backpack size and its bullet capacity by spending Eridium. Grenades and shields are governed by loot drops and purchases; shields vary from light but fast-recharging to heavy but slow to recover, and often come with elemental effects, such as setting melee attackers on fire or delivering elemental damage on being exhausted. Relics and class-specific mod slots provide even more flexibility, and you can also choose to buff even more stats – such as accuracy, elemental damage rate and many more – through fulfilling challenges. These achievement-like awards raise a 'Badass Rank' that applies to all your characters, not just the one who earned them, though you can switch it off for a more purist approach.

The core differentiation between classes instead lies in their core abilities, and you'll find many options to explore them when you finally have maxed-out skill trees. The Assassin, for instance, can keep Deception going if you chain together one-hit melee kills, a skill that trades on the keen design point that the longer you stay cloaked, the bigger the melee damage bonus you'll get. The Commando's turret is more adaptable than the Soldier's, fulfilling a defensive role and also an offensive one once you can shoot it into right into a cluster of enemies. (Tip: hang back with a sniper rifle while they set about it.) It also works well with *Borderlands*' masterful Second Wind feature, which grants you a full return to life if you can get a kill while incapacitated.

If you hadn't noticed, *Borderlands 2* puts more emphasis on offence, something corroborated by its level design and AI. While combat in the first game was often at long range and relatively static, it's become a lot more personal in this sequel. Though the levels are just as expansive, your paths through them take you into more confined discrete rooms as well as clearings that accentuate proximity, often presented on different elevations. The result is more intense encounters, and



ABOVE Part of Hyperion Corp's seemingly inexhaustible robot army, The Constructor is introduced as a boss. It can't move, but as its name suggests, it generates robots to flush you out of cover and into the path of its lasers and rockets. **LEFT** The Gunzerker class can dual-wield; one of his skill trees gives damage bonuses for switching between guns and reduces the need for reloading, partly justifying his rather bombastic class name

BELOW Characters are introduced with similarly dramatic screens as the original game, but we're sure they have a little extra something this time around. That goes for most of the sequel's features



ABOVE Guess what you have to do here. The magic of *Borderlands 2*'s missions is that some may be long and involved, but others are the absolute opposite. You never know what you're going to get next



they're supported by more aggressive and dynamic AI. Many of the colourful enemy types dodge, many more relentlessly lumber or run towards you, and most toss grenades with abandon. Luckily, on your side are weapon drops that seem to offer more variety and power than in the first game, and thrilling multi-faction battles that throw new tactics into play. And there's also the seemingly minor detail that at last you don't have to manually pick up ammo, health or cash drops from the ground, keeping you in the action.

Given the glorious sense of flow to most of the game, it's a pity that bosses present spikes in the difficulty level. It was an issue with the original, too, and one Gearbox has said that players actually liked, but it's a preference that's hard to understand. Bosses' large health bars and propensity to both respawn standard enemies and regenerate health makes them frustrating, especially for those playing alone. Their design is better tuned for co-op, where you have extra hands to take care of clearing grunts and reviving fallen comrades while damage-dealers can keep putting fire down, but the difficulty scaling means that their health bar is even more unassailable when four players are on the case.

The world of Pandora, the planet on which both games are set, is laid out in a similar manner as before: a set of large connected open areas. Their geography is intricate – rolling plains bisected by crevasses, for instance – and sending you on routes that tour the full space. But, once again, it's hard to feel Pandora is a coherent world, its distinct regions divided by loading screens. There's diversity, of course – your adventure spans tundra, precipitous highlands, desert ripe for vehicle combat, a wildlife park, a city – but the cut-



MISSION CONTROL
The early game restricts the number of available side missions, focusing your actions before you reach the main hub of Sanctuary, where it then opens up. The basic structure is identical to *Borderlands*, with you talking to NPCs to take on missions, and though the main story feels rather incidental to the game's core attractions, some fairly epic events occur that it'd spoil to relate here. Taking a page from the success of the original's DLC, the side missions feature the most lurid and silly threads, spanning from whodunnits to tea party arranging, and come spiced with genuinely funny writing.

ABOVE Pandora's different regions feature different types of murderous fauna, and the Bullymongs are among the first you meet. They're fast, they leap and they hit hard. Bring your best gun, and preferably a friend as well

and-paste approach to the details within them means they inspire little desire for exploration.

The main hub is Sanctuary, a full town of shops and the home to a roster of gleefully colourful characters. Almost as if to acknowledge how similar *Borderlands 2* is to its predecessor, the cameos come in thick and fast. The full original team of player characters crops up – Roland, Mordecai, Lilith and Brick – as do Mad Moxxi, Dr Zed, Scooter and, of course, Claptrap. The new characters are just as vivid, however: Sir Hammerlock, the gentleman hunter; an obese mechanic called Ellie; the psychotic Tiny Tina; and the villain of the piece, Handsome Jack. They're all voiced as vividly as they're realised visually, from Jack's glib sarcasm to Tiny Tina's unstable teen sass.

They make up for a throwaway plot that involves Jack, president of the Hyperion Corporation, trying to open the fabled Vault. Though sharply written, the story is little more than an excuse to throw you through missions, and just the sort of thing you'll ignore when playing co-op, but it hardly matters when the heart of the game is such gleeful, schlocky tactical combat. *Borderlands 2* might not develop extensively on its forebear, but it has even greater power to hold you for hours on end, deftly weaving RPG stat development with skill-based play. It's enough to make every decision you make meaningful and fun, and lend the realisation that Gearbox knows more about the fundamentals of the shooter than almost any other developer. Did we take Widow Maker? Yes, but we soon ditched it for a Purging Anarchist.

9

Post Script

Interview: Paul Hellquist, creative director; Anthony Burch, writer

Borderlands 2 is struck through with snappy and funny writing, surreal quests, and extravagant characters. Creative director **Paul Hellquist** and writer **Anthony Burch** explain how they've brought story to Pandora's open wasteland, the importance of humour, and how Burch created the concepts behind some of the game's missions. But only the silliest ones.

How did you approach the storytelling for an open-world co-op game?
Anthony Burch There were two big philosophies. The first was making sure that all of the dialogue you hear is directly connected to the mission and actual gameplay. You can ignore it if you really don't care, but it's something that's totally omnipresent – someone has to tell you what it is and why you have to do it. The flipside is that we know that co-op is all about emergent stories, not authored ones... talking with your friends, like, "Oh my God, did you see what I did with that Psycho?" The story was very much focused on the singleplayer experience. In the first game, singleplayer could feel a little lonely or desolate, and we were hoping that the story would flesh that out a bit. Together you might miss a fair amount of it, and we're completely fine with that, because your friends matter more than the dumbass jokes I wrote.

Was it all your own writing, Anthony?
AB It was mostly just me. Later on, Mikey Neumann, the writer of *Borderlands*, who wrote the characters of Scooter and Zed, did some of their dialogue. It was myself doing top-level story and missions.
Paul Hellquist Anthony and I worked together from a story outlining perspective, and he wrote all the words. I read the script seven or eight times front to back.

Given the size of the game, that must be a big script. Exactly how big was it?
PH If you just count the plot, it was about 120-130 pages. That doesn't count the 110 side mission scripts.
AB Or the battle dialogue. If we compare it to the original game, the script is five to seven times bigger.

Why are the characters in *Borderlands 2* so much larger than life?
AB I think the art style gave us a lot of freedom to do that, especially after the first game's DLC. *Borderlands* is funny because the gameplay is inherently funny – when you throw a grenade that splits into five smaller grenades that set everything on fire, and then a midget on fire runs out and explodes, that's inherently funny. It was freeing to write characters who make sense in a universe where that happens all the time.


Paul Hellquist, creative director


Anthony Burch, writer

Do you think that you could do a serious open-world shooter?
AB We *could*, but it'd be a lot less fun for everybody.
PH We think this franchise can do all [sorts of] different things. We're always trying to have serious things happen, but always give them a bit of a twist, or a comedic angle. Some character is going to make light of it. When you really look at the story, at what's happening and what's said, there are a lot of dark and tragic things going on.
AB Like the whole thing with Scooter in the first game, it's like, 'The dude is super funny, because he's making jokes about his mom's girly parts!' But he straight up shoots somebody for having sex with her. He's not a very decent human being, but the presentation is very 'Ha ha, it's no big deal' to balance it.

What comes first, mission designs or storylines?
PH It goes both ways. Sometimes the designer will have a cool idea for gameplay that would be fun, and then Anthony will come up with the fictional wrapper around that so it fits in with other things going on... And other times Anthony says it'd be cool to tell a little story and the mission design comes out of that.
AB That was one of the advantages of working with the designers from the start, rather than being an off-site dude. We go back and forth between the art team and design, seeing how we can tell stories.

What missions did you come up with?
AB I only came up with basic ideas – I'm far too lazy. Generally the ones that have no interesting gameplay but [you're like] "What just happened?" Ones that sound stupid when you say them in a meeting.
PH The Claptrap birthday missions, they came out of Anthony, and the one where you're asked to shoot a bandit in the face. It took a little convincing the level designers that they could count as missions, because they're like, "What do you do?" And he's like, "You shoot him in the face." "That's it?" "It's funny! That's the point!" The wacky ones come from story and the heavy combat ones come from the designers.

How did you get the amazing voice performances?
AB Gosh, I don't know! We just had really talented actors most of the time. We got Dameon Clarke as Handsome Jack – just normally he sounds a lot like Jack, that air of confidence and charisma, but with a streak of immaturity. We just worked closely with the actors, pointing out what we did and didn't like. It was useful to show them trailers of the game – they'd start with all this gravitas, and then get the tone right once they'd seen what it was actually all about. ■

Guild Wars 2

Guild Wars 2 is meant to be all things to all people. It's supposed to be both a revolution for those already embedded in the peculiarities of massively multiplayer roleplaying, and the game that lures outsiders into the genre. ArenaNet is aiming, by accident or choice, for Schrödinger's MMORPG: a game that exists in a dual state, pleasing two distinct groups.

Astoundingly, it's got close, although *Guild Wars 2*'s advances should be considered on a sliding context scale. At the thin end of the wedge, small adjustments have made the experience friendlier for veterans. These tiny tweaks to questing and grouping will be apparent to old hands, but fly right over the heads of newcomers. Fresh eyes will instead look at *Guild Wars 2*'s snappy combat, perhaps finding their first inroad to a genre that usually looks too stilted for fans of rapid payoff.

Guild Wars 2 still sets its camp in the lush, verdant MMORPG forest. Quests involve killing a lot of the same things. Combat skills are accessible via the number keys. Guilds provide a social home for players, while banks store items, and crafting stations let you make a lot of shoes. *GW2* has smoothed out a great many of the traditional MMOG's rough edges – the template laid down by *EverQuest* – but this is no vast change. Some improvements are obvious, and some take hours of digging to uncover.

Tyria is a place of rolling green hills, icy fjords and dinky villages. Large open fields are graded by level, and most AI characters stand stock still, roped in to provide window dressing to the traditional fantasy universe – but the world has many visual innovations, too. Rata Sum lies over in the extreme west, a host of floating pyramids run by clanking automatons. It's the home of bunny-eared gremlins the Asura, and their city is held together by a combination of force fields, brilliant crystals and intertwining branches. Similar branches also feature in the Grove, the home of *Guild Wars 2*'s new race of advanced plants, the Sylvari. They live inside a giant tree, moulding it into an approximation of the fiction's older races' homes. Vast leaves obscure doorways, gangplanks grow out of roots, and everywhere twinkling seeds fall gently to the ground. Movement around the Grove is possible thanks to giant, seemingly tame seed pods that ferry passengers between points. Like Rata Sum, it's beautiful, and it invites exploration.

Tyria feels relentlessly designed. If MMOG spaces are often perfunctory expanses studded with quests, *Guild Wars 2*'s capital cities and the spaces around them are rich with imagination. The curious will find pirate ships and mines, and while many exist to provide homes for later questlines, others are there simply to discover. The game's Vista system codifies the joy of exploration: dotted around each area are map icons, and if you make your way to one of these

Publisher NCsoft
Developer ArenaNet
Format PC
Release Out now

A jaunt through an unexplored area will have any number of things making puppy-dog eyes at you to play with them



and press F, you're treated to a panoramic sweep of the surrounding scenery. This is both pretty – thanks to *Guild Wars*' colourful, sumptuous art style – and useful in planning your next move.

The world is huge, but the problems of transit around it have been solved. Uncover a waypoint in an area and you can warp to it from anywhere in Tyria for a nominal fee. Those who aren't too curious will find themselves sticking to their starting zones until around level 30 if they stick slavishly to the story, but there's little to stop players from poking their noses around the other races' homelands sooner.

Yet even when your network of waypoints is extensive, it's often more fun to walk. A jaunt through an unexplored area is like a stroll through a pet shop, with any number of things making puppy-dog eyes in your direction so you'll go over to play with them. The aforementioned Vistas are located in hard-to-reach places that necessitate some mild jumping, while skill point challenges task you with beating a tough enemy, and pay out in tokens you can put towards learning secondary abilities for use on the battlefield. But perhaps most important of all – and similarly spotted by skirting close enough to see them – are *Guild Wars 2*'s dynamic quests and events.

Rather than forcing you to badger NPCs for odd jobs, *Guild Wars 2* has them standing out in the open, screaming their predicament for all to hear. Hearts appear on the game's map; initially hollow, you can fill them by performing certain tasks for their owner without you ever having to click through a single dialogue box. On your Tyrian travels, you'll also spot various symbols of battle, supported by text in the top-right of the screen. Move close to the source and you can collaborate with nearby players to complete a quest – guard a submarine from underwater saboteurs, kill waves of centaurs, and so on. Finish it, and you'll get an experience bump and fresh loot, but you're also free to wander off and let others deal with the problem if you so chose. It's the same with the game's solo quests (Renown Hearts in Tyrian parlance), in which you're free to move on should you tire of killing spiders or repelling crop thieves.

And you will tire of it. *Guild Wars 2*'s quest acquisition is novel in comparison with its peers, but the dynamic quests themselves are the same as they ever were: kill ten of these, pick up 15 of that. There's the occasional snappy, well-plotted example, but the majority grate quickly – especially as there never seems to be quite enough of your target in the designated area, forcing you to backtrack and twiddle your thumbs until the MMOG gods deign to resupply the world with monsters. This problem is counterbalanced by the sheer weight of *stuff* in Tyria – a boring Renown Heart can be dismissed without fear it'll consign you to a life of





ABOVE A character's skills are dictated by weapon type. Everyone has access to two sets, which can be flipped between via the tilde key, and their arrangement determines the skills along the number key row



TOP Underwater combat is handled surprisingly well. Water is often deep and filled with both monsters and quest objects. Dip below the waves and your character changes their weapon set, giving you a new range of abilities to play with.
ABOVE World versus World combat is *Guild Wars 2* at its most vast and confusing. The mode pits servers against each other, asking three sides to capture points in an area as big as any race's starting region. Fights are colourful, but it can be easy to get lost in the scrum.
RIGHT *Guild Wars 2* is at once a completionist's dream and nightmare. Wander through any area and you'll be gently nudged into completing dynamic quests open to all. They're easy enough to avoid – with no penalties for leaving them to others – but the rewards are often excellent



under-levelled death – but the story quests rely on players devoting at least some time to upping their skills between chunks of exposition.

Class stories swing in and out of focus – around level ten, for example, there's a suggested arc that mostly ties itself up neatly, only to be reopened around level 14. This gap is designed to be plugged with questing, or crafting, or gathering, or exploring, or PvP. The stories themselves are earnest things, fantasy staples often told with the most po of faces. The bear-cat Charr have a traitor legion to deal with, the Viking-like Norn are keen for you to become individually glorious. The writing throughout is but a few steps from 'thees' and 'thous,' and only the tiddly Asura have much fun with their origin stories, sending robots and golems haywire, and trying to clean up the mess.

The classes themselves are more enjoyable. Each has a definite function in combat. The Ranger and Engineer affect a battlefield from afar; the Guardian stands in the centre and tries to make himself as big a target as possible. But each has more flexibility than a character in most MMOGs. A few levels in, players get access to a second weapon slot. Weapon choice dictates your core skills. The Thief, for example, when using a pistol and dagger, can launch himself forward with Shadow Shot, before delivering a mighty backstab. But pressing a key will switch his gun and shiv for another toy, perhaps a shortbow. On the fly, a Thief can then flip between peppering a target from afar, and getting in close to deliver the final blow.

This makes for a satisfyingly open combat system. You're still tapping number keys, but battling is far less static than in other MMOGs. *GW2* has a dodge –



MONEY FOR NOTHING

You can earn experience through means other than standard questing. Crafting items is painless, spits out a good chunk of XP, and actually speeds up the more items you want to make at once. The World versus World mode also nets participants' experience, throwing them into a tactical siege game between their own server's denizens and those inhabiting others. The truly dedicated can even level up entirely by gathering items – completing dynamic quests isn't a necessity. Indeed, the first player to hit the level cap of 80 did so by crafting a ludicrous number of items and keeping out of combat.

Even for an MMOG, *Guild Wars 2* is huge, and we'll have missed elements: indeed, at the time of writing, the game's plans for level 80 players are yet to be truly divined, so small is the community of such elites at present

double-tap a direction – and it's expected you'll use it to avoid attacks before they connect in realtime. It's not an action game, but it's closer than the genre's got before, so battles demand a new level of focus.

Particularly when combat is so tough. Bosses in the game's dungeons – currently eight story-led runs through gauntlets of tough enemies, necessitating a powerful group – can feel more like a *Dark Souls* enemy than a *World Of Warcraft* foe, forcing assailants to learn attack patterns and movements, not simply their own skill rotation. Sadly, some of these foes fall back on the MMORPG's shortcut for increasing an enemy's difficulty: a big health bar. Skill gives way to grind as players fall into muscle-memory routine.

It's a shame that the game still relies on this grind, especially when it tries so hard to respect the player elsewhere. Without a subscription fee, the most valuable thing you'll be giving *GW2* on a regular basis is time. Other MMOGs artificially inflate their worlds, forcing players to walk everywhere and sift through hours of busywork to progress. *GW2* jettisons that approach, making fast travel easy and stuffing the map with things to do. The result is a game that rarely overstays its welcome, but when it does, it's oddly more disappointing than it would be in something lesser.

Guild Wars 2 is a few brushstrokes short of a masterpiece, then, but ArenaNet has succeeded in trying to paint over the worst of the genre's cracks. Thanks to a rigorous programme of restoration, only sometimes do its underlying imperfections show through the glossy veneer.

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Post Script

The subscription-based MMOG is dying, and Guild Wars 2 has helped to kill it

The traditional MMORPG is spluttering its last, run through by a column of hungry young challengers with *Guild Wars 2* at the head. The old guard stood static too long, expecting monthly tithes from their players for the privilege of playing their games. The new and fresh have adapted to payment models blown in from the east – systems now repurposed for western consumption. In short, *Guild Wars 2* will help kill the subscription-based model, and few will mourn it.

It's strange to think of *GW2*'s payment model as novel. This is a product available for a fixed price that offers tens – hundreds – of hours of entertainment without further expense from the player. Put against most games, *GW2* is utterly typical: interested parties stump up the cash for the base game, and buy add-on packs as they become available that offer extra content to expand the world.

But *GW2* isn't like most games. ArenaNet's title is an MMORPG, and its payment model is largely untested in the genre: only its forefather attempted something similar. But untested doesn't mean unsuited.

MMOGs have traditionally required an initial investment followed by a monthly outlay. That's the model set up by the genre's forefathers, games such as *EverQuest*. That's the model popularised and cemented by genre behemoth *World Of Warcraft*. It was, until the last few years, simply the way things were for MMOGs. The 2000s saw the birth of tens of them, and the short years after their release saw their slow deaths.

WOW's set standard – a monthly subscription fee of around £10 – was adopted slavishly by these games. *WOW* succeeded with the model, but it's hard to argue that *WOW* succeeded *because* of the model; more likely, because it was bottled lightning, ticking countless intangible boxes – right place, right time, right player base, right system specs – in a way that Blizzard is peculiarly excellent at. But few others were able to emulate its success, let alone its prodigious earnings. The years after *WOW*'s release saw games tipped to take the crown, only for their subscriber numbers to stumble and drop. Some dwindled more slowly than others, and some strange success stories persisted – albeit on a far smaller scale – but it appeared there was only one space at the top during the 2000s, and its occupant was jealously guarding its position.

This decade saw another MMOG payment model blink into existence. Free-to-play offered something – however meagre – for nothing. Early examples of the model include *RuneScape* and *MapleStory*. Both are open to all, no subscription fee required, but both have also been famously exploitative. Free players are restricted and stymied along their journeys, goaded into coughing up for the kind of features subs-based MMOGs counted as standard. To strip an MMOG of subscription fees was to condemn it to critical ignorance and damnation outside of a cash-poor, time-rich, often ultra-young demographic: a group without enough wallet power to make the game in question a true success.

Devs seemed doomed to point to World Of Warcraft's success, point to its subscription model, and equate the two



The first *Guild* *Wars* was released a few scant months after *WOW*, free to play after the game's initial purchase, but with levelling capped at 20. Unlike most of its peers, *Guild Wars* didn't flounder. It never hit the player numbers of its obvious rival, but by not making a constant stream of subscription dollars a necessity to keep the company afloat, ArenaNet was comfortable with the return. It took a long time for *Guild Wars*' lessons to filter out to a wider audience. Developers seemed doomed to point to *WOW*'s success, point to its subscription model, and equate the two. But the turn of the decade saw a sea change.

It took a handful of quality titles to prove that the free-to-play model itself wasn't the cause of the gulf in quality between subs-based and free MMOGs: the games were. Free-to-play MMOGs weren't terrible because they were free-to-play, they were terrible because they were terrible.

Those outside the MMOG sector – presumably unwed to the pervasiveness of the subscription fee – reacted first. Games like *League Of Legends* adopted the model, allowing its players the run of the playground, only eking cash out of them after they'd already fallen in love with its tight, satisfying mechanics. Some in MMOG publishing and development spotted the shift and leapt outwards from their sinking, subs-based ships to grab hold of the lifesaving model. *Lord Of The Rings Online* was one of the first, and one of the most successful. Six weeks after the switch to a free-to-play model with attached real-money shop, developer Turbine's revenue had doubled. Others soon followed.

Most telling of all is the slide toward free-to-play of *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. Born and bred to tear *WOW*'s throat out, BioWare's first MMOG is introducing a free-to-play option after seeing lower subscriber numbers than expected. Even *WOW* itself is beginning to deflate: numbers were down a staggering 1.1 million in the three months before August.

Guild Wars 2 – at this early stage – looks near-immune to such problems. ArenaNet isn't dependent on monthly firefighting to produce paid updates that are doubtless already planned. Indeed, *GW2* is as slick and crafted as every other subscription MMOG out there. When the competition looks as good as this without a regular drip-feed of cash, it's hard to see quite what your monthly fee goes towards. That realisation may well sound the death knell for MMOG subscriptions. ■

Skulls Of The Shogun

Publisher 17-Bit
Developer In-house
Format 360, PC, Surface, Windows Phone
Release October

Skulls Of The Shogun has something that no fine upstanding samurai should be without, and that's strength of character. That said, it's probably not a character of which a fine upstanding samurai would approve. Wickedly irreverent and cartoonishly outrageous, 17-Bit's debut isn't just a first game, it's a declaration of ambition: this is a team out to remix existing genres and imprint on them a distinctive retro-pastiche style.

Sometimes, that style can be a bit too much. *Skulls Of The Shogun* commits the cardinal sin of a strategy game: being so enamoured of its looks that the player can lose track of what's going on. *Shogun*'s thick inky lines and cherry blossom effects make for eye-catching scenes, though – especially when the weather effects kick in – and its Japanese afterlife manages to look convincingly eastern even as its art style avoids overt manga and anime inspirations.

The problem arises, however, when its adorable little undead soldiers start grouping together. *Shogun* eschews the typical strategy game grid system (more on this later), which means a clash between two skeletal armies can look unfortunately like an ungainly bolus of skulls and armour plating. This isn't helped by a similarity of style between core units that can make it tricky to tell archers and infantry apart at a glance.

A lack of visual clarity in a strategy game really should be unforgivable, but somehow *Skulls Of The Shogun* charms its way back into your affections. The story begins with the death of gruff, arrogant samurai general Akamoto, who washes up on the shores of The Land Of Dead and proceeds to wreak angry, indignant revenge upon anyone in his way. Some might find the script overly self-conscious at times, with its jokey references to game mechanics and coloured tutorial texts, but that doesn't stop *Skulls Of The Shogun* from being genuinely witty. It also, a touch surprisingly, features some of the most creative foul language since *Bulletstorm*, in the form of an enemy general who speaks in soundalike euphemisms ("conk-stuffers") that – just as in People Can Fly's game – become immaturely, irresistibly silly through sheer critical mass.

Equally endearing are the hints of other games that turn up in *Skulls Of The Shogun*'s world – including one supporting character who appears to have been lifted straight out of *Okami*, and others who wouldn't look out of place in *The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker*. But while other games might not get away with such brazen homages, there's a glint in *Skulls Of The Shogun*'s empty eye socket that helps 17-Bit pull them off.

The strategy is turn-based and (in singleplayer, at least) relatively quickfire. While you can bring in reinforcements via captured spawn points, they cost resources that are limited in supply, and a strict limit of five moves per turn ensures fraught decisions. But while these skirmishes might not be large in scale, 17-Bit has come up with a roster of tactical scenarios that wring variety from its simple set of units.

One level might see you rushing your general (who blends the offensive power of a chess queen with the game-ending vulnerability of a king) to the exit of the stage while enemy reinforcements pour in from behind. Another might drop you in an open valley bisected by a river, offering just the single choke point of a bridge to cross. Then there's the opposite extreme – the glorified cage matches that drop you and the enemy in close proximity with little environmental cover, which are over within a matter of turns.

> Skirmishes aren't large, but 17-Bit has come up with a roster of tactical scenarios that wring variety from its units

17-Bit has spoken of *Advance Wars'* influence on its design, and it's easy to see in these scenario-led missions. That said, *Skulls Of The Shogun* differs from its inspirations in one major respect: analogue movement. Select a unit – you have five such 'orders' per turn – and a white circle will appear around it. You can move your unit anywhere within its circumference in order to position it for an attack, and any left over range can be used after the strike to make your escape. Taken by itself, the approach isn't particularly transformational – in fact, it merely seems to rob the game of some of the discrete tactical clarity offered by the standard grid-based system. But in conjunction with one of the game's other mechanics, knockback, it starts to make more sense.

Melee strikes in *Shogun* knock enemies backwards (when you line up your strike, a white line emanates from them that shows their trajectory) and, if you've positioned yourself carefully, knocking foes away might well push them off the edge of a cliff or into a thick tangle of thorns. Occasionally, it might just knock them out of range of your more vulnerable units on their next turn. The power of knockback is offset by units' ability to clump together and become impervious to its effects. This allows them to cross bridges safely as a tightly knit group – providing, of course, that the opposing player doesn't break a link in the chain.

While *Skulls Of The Shogun*'s AI throws up a convincing challenge (and has an uncanny and irritatingly precise eye for knockback opportunities when your units are standing near a cliff), it takes more cautious human opponents to extract the most tactical possibilities from these mechanics. But even without the aid of another player, *Skulls Of The Shogun* steps comfortably into the cheerily tactical niche left vacant in recent years by the absence of a new *Advance Wars*. It feels different, and lacks the hypnotically logical flow of its master, in part through its abandonment of crystal clear visual design and digital movement. But, in a manner that the cast of undead warriors would no doubt approve, it honours its spirit.

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HEADS UP
Skulls Of The Shogun gets its name from the skulls dropped by fallen enemies – your units can eat these for health and offensive bonuses. If a unit eats three skulls, it gains an extra attack per move. Until it reaches that point, however, swallowing a skull means using up that unit's single action each turn. Combined with the limited number of turns, this frequently throws up choices between minor attacks on the enemy early on, or a super-powered coup de grâce later. Meanwhile, your opponent will be trying to gobble the dropped skulls of your own defeated forces.





ABOVE When selecting a unit to attack, new circles appear. Enemies within the red ring usually won't be able to avoid your unit's strike. Foes in the orange circle, however, have a chance of successfully pulling off a dodge





TOP Spirit walls can be used to defend injured units, or simply to block enemy progress through the map. At times, enemies can sneak through a chink in your armour that wasn't visually clear, however, which can be a little frustrating. ABOVE Generals are able to attack multiple times in one turn, making them supremely useful in the thick of a fray. Advance with your leader too soon, though, and you can easily lose them (and the level). LEFT To deploy a monk, you have to 'haunt' their shrine. Some monks are healing focused, whereas others specialise in offensive magic. More interesting attacks cost rice, which you also need to deploy standard units

Post Script

Interview: Jake Kazdal, creative director; Borut Pfeifer, programmer

Three years ago, a group of ex-EA Los Angeles staffers broke away from the publisher to make a turn-based tactics game about ghost samurai. In that time, the team has swapped names (it was originally known as Haunted Temple Games), but its vision has remained the same. We talk to creative director **Jake Kazdal** and programmer **Borut Pfeifer** about their journey through the afterlife.

The game has been in development for quite some time. How much did it change over the years, and how close is the finished game to the original idea?
Jake Kazdal When it started over three years ago, Borut and I planned to do a quick six-month iPhone game. Obviously, much has changed. That being said, the idea was always a streamlined, fast-paced strategy game, but as we dove into production... the things we ran with as they surfaced were very snappy gameplay and quick turns. [We spent] lots of time on visual communication so you just know things like, 'Is this guy going to attack back?' and 'Am I in range?' These things are all communicated through animation states instead of stats.

By leaving behind the grid system and adopting analogue movement, you've sacrificed a kind of puzzle game clarity for more of an action game feel. Was this your intention?
JK This was exactly the intention. Not 'I can move three squares away from him, because he can only shoot two squares,' but 'I'm gonna try to hold this front, and next round rush in with my cavalry and trash him!' It really does feel much more from the hip... It's meant to be more abstract and broader strokes; it's not an exact science where you calculate exact distances. It's got fuzzy edges and feels more like barking commands in a skirmish than absolute tactical exactness.
Borut Pfeifer We do a lot of things to kind of amplify the drama in the systems design, and what that means is that there's lots of opportunities for players to shift the power balance rapidly. A lot of games have a rock-paper-scissors approach, and you can get in the situation where one person has rock and the other has scissors, and they're just losing through the whole match. We wanted a faster-paced, sort of basketball game approach, where there's a back and forth. So we do things like [having limited] cash resources, so you won't get in the situation where you're constantly generating resources and just churning against each other.

How did the absence of grids affect level design?
JK It was very liberating – very organic, very tunable, and extremely flexible. We all had a great time working on levels, and we have lots of different types of stages, from full-frontal assaults to sneaky flanks; tiny fighting-game-style arcade maps to massive, epic battles; and everything in-between! Without needing to work on a grid, you immediately get a lot more flexibility and variety, which was a very fun challenge, and led to a lot of interesting results.
BP I'd done a lot of design stuff at other companies, but I hadn't done a lot of spatial design before. It involved a lot of estimating and gut checks, a lot of iteration. There can be some subtleties in how games will play out based on minor starting position changes, so you have to take that into account.



Jake Kazdal, creative director


Borut Pfeifer, programmer

"I'd done a lot of design stuff, but I hadn't done a lot of spatial design. It involved a lot of estimating and gut checks"



There are many nods to other games – we're thinking *Wind Waker* and *Okami* specifically – in your visual style and character design. How conscious were these homages?
JK During my years as an artist at Sega in Tokyo, I became heavily influenced by late '60s and early '70s anime. I absolutely swooned at the visual style of *Wind Waker* when I first saw it, and that led me to a lifetime hobby of tracking down art books of old animated films from Toei, as well as animated TV shows from the late black-and-white era out of Japan. It's obvious that *Wind Waker* was also heavily influenced by this same stuff – there is a film from that era called Wanpaku Oji no Orochi Taiji that you can see is the direct ancestor of that look. When I decided to make a game, and got to choose what style to immerse myself in, and really train myself in, there wasn't a moment of doubt where I would be looking for inspiration! I'm sure *Okami*'s staff were also big fans of this era of amazing animated films and cartoons out of Japan. Later, watching Samurai Jack, I realised they were really looking at a lot of that same stuff, we have a lot of shared influences.

How did you approach designing a control scheme and user interface that would translate across so many different platforms?
JK Well, it really got legs as it started as an Xbox 360 game, so the lead control scheme was the 360 pad. We then started working on the [Windows] phone version, implementing touch controls, which eventually led to a lot less stress when working on the tablet version. Really, we're very lucky that it is a turn-based strategy game that allows for good touch controls, and it just took a lot of time, tuning, blood and tears to get it working across pad, touch, and mouse/keyboard in the end. [There's] something for everyone, for sure – all different kinds of players. Personally, I'm a huge fan of arcade-style action and adventure games, and for me the pad works perfectly! ■


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Counter-Strike: Global Offensive

Somehow *Counter-Strike* has survived. Born as a *Half-Life* mod, it reached maturity (as version 1.6) in the era before broadband was ubiquitous, and before Steam made the installation of custom mods a doddle. Despite this, *Counter-Strike* has endured, even after *Counter-Strike: Source* cleaved the community into two vehemently opposed camps. It's flourished even, for a time becoming the gold standard of online gaming.

Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, a collaboration between Valve and *Defense Grid* developer Hidden Path Entertainment, is the product of *Counter-Strike*'s feral lust for life. It's a game few asked for – even those still playing the original over a decade later are vocal about preferring the reincorporation of *CS 1.6*'s mechanics in something like *CSPromod* – but it's one on which numerous hopes now lie. *GO* is seen by a subset of the hyper-skilled pro-gaming elite as their last chance to repopularise the shooter as an e-sport, bringing multiplayer FPSes away from the excesses of *COD*, and back to *CS*'s composed, methodical style.

The slow years of decline haven't blunted *CS*'s stubbornness. Many lessons have been learned by FPS developers since the mod's first appearance in 1999, but *Global Offensive* ignores almost all of them. It feels reverential in its obedience to rules laid down in the early 2000s, and is somehow less malleable and physical than 2004's *CS: Source*. That game's objects existed on a physical plane, and could be knocked around. Occasionally, that made for tactical battlefield feng shui; more importantly, it breathed new life into its maps, which were often staid places, untouched by a designer's hand in years. In *GO*, all objects have been glued down: an entire clip won't budge a small plastic telephone from its serene position on a desk in cs_office, and de_dust2's barrels won't shift for any man.

Those maps return largely unchanged in *GO*'s 'Classic' mode, bar a few refits. It's understandable: few gaming arenas are as instantly recognisable as the sandy de_dust, while maps such as cs_italy and dust's own progeny, de_dust2, take rankings almost as high. Dust itself gets a new entryway in the middle of the map, allowing forces moving through the tunnel area to get the jump on would-be flankers. This may seem like a miniscule addition, but *Counter-Strike* is a game built on endless repetition of the same few areas and even minor geographical tweaks can mean the world to a player weaned on a certain locale – it's like coming back home and finding all your possessions moved around.

In action, the map tweaks make for a slightly faster game than *CS: Source*. On average, it feels like Classic mode games – both competitive, with friendly fire and player collision on, and casual, with both turned off – end sooner, each player quickly relieved of their one life per round. But the differences are on a small scale: players are still free to set up shop in camping spots

Publisher Valve
Developer In-house/Hidden Path
Format 360, Mac, PC (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

Many lessons have been learned by FPS developers since 1999 – Global Offensive ignores almost all of them



THIS IS MY RIFLE
Each weapon has a personality: the AK is boisterous and eager to please in its barking spray of bullets; the M4A4 is businesslike, but prone to going off on a tangent as it dispenses its shells. New weapons like the Nova shotgun and the MP7 are straight swaps for earlier analogues. The developers have tried to widen the weapon pool to encourage more specialisation in play styles, but in Classic mode players still only buy the big four: the M4A4, the AK, the Desert Eagle and the preposterously powerful AWP sniper rifle. As it ever was.

memorised from years of play, and games often end in achingly slow one-on-ones, both surviving players cautiously creeping around corners as dead spectators will them to their deaths so they can play again.

At its best, *Counter-Strike*'s Classic mode is tense and tactical. The sparse, sanitised maps make matches about personal skill and – on special occasions, or with a coordinated squad – teamwork. *GO* is pared back where other modern multiplayer shooters pack more layers on, and there's a definite fairness to a match played well, or badly.

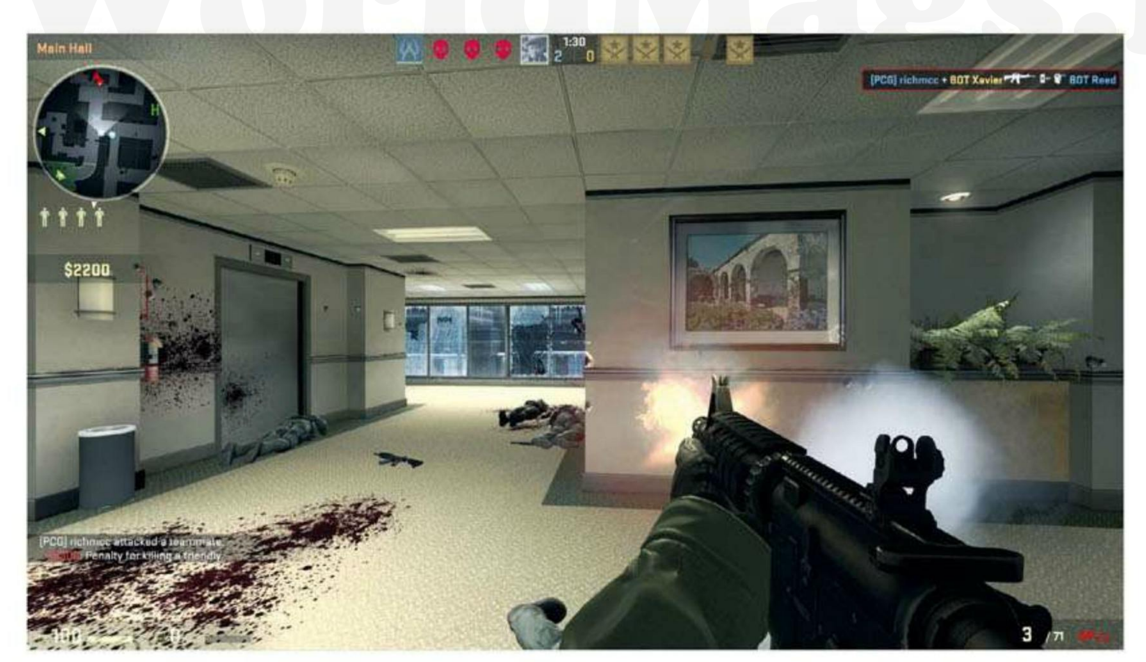
Arms Race and Demolition are *GO*'s new modes, the game's two concessions to modernity, and they're retoolings of popular mod-within-a-mod *Gun Game*. First introduced to vanilla *Counter-Strike*, *Gun Game* tasks players with scoring kills with a variety of the game's weapons, each successful assassination yielding the next tier of guns. Arms Race recreates this, the winner being the first player to score a kill with each gun; Demolition adds a thin film of strategy, giving the terrorist side a bomb to plant. Both modes are frantic, the hyperactive siblings to the measured 'main' game. In Arms Race, adopting *Counter-Strike*'s traditionally steady pace will soon see you outscored by pogoing teammates spraying wildly to score lucky headshots. It's a better bet to rely on your twitch muscles and reptilian brain, stripping out some of the tactical pleasure.

Both modes are palate cleansers for the Classic game type, but neither feel like they have lasting potential outside of that role. But those maps remain, and so does the kinesthetic thrill of *Counter-Strike*'s combat. *GO*'s gunplay starts off feeling archaic; come in from another shooter and iron sights are the most jarring omission. *GO*'s guns remain resolutely hip-bound, and lose accuracy rapidly after the first shot. That's not to say there's no finesse in aiming: gun combat is *Counter-Strike*'s central – its only – tenet, and learning to control the wild spray of an AK47, the kickback of a Glock 18, or the muffled burst of an MP7 submachine gun is both its hardest challenge and greatest joy.

Mastering a weapon is a skill that takes time, but one that pays off in an appreciable way: in a straight duel, the player more skilled with his or her firearm will usually win out. The super-skilled will argue the toss for years to come on whether *GO*'s flinch animations and bullet spread patterns are acceptable, but for the typical player, firefights provide a regular source of adrenaline.

And it's this that keeps *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* feeling fair, competitive and, above all, relevant. The game is largely unchanged after a decade, sanded down by fresh hands instead of painted up, but wielding its familiar weapons on familiar maps still manages to produce a familiar thrill.

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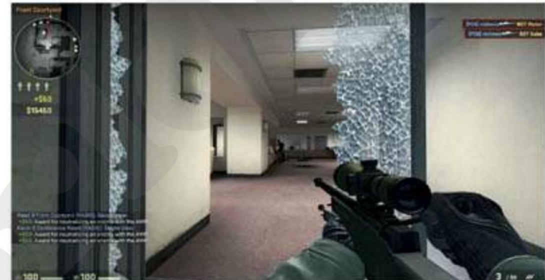


LEFT Gun effects are comparatively muffled, going along with the muted look of the game. It's got a colder palette than either *CS 1.6* or *Source*, which is quite a feat. **BELOW** Classic and Demolition modes can be won by planting the bomb and having it explode as a terrorist, or by defusing it as a counter-terrorist. In Demolition particularly, the bomb sees little action: the maps are so small that teams are usually killed before it can be planted



FAR RIGHT Glass shatters in window frames, but the gleeful physics of *CS: Source* have been stripped out. *CS:GO* is a more sanitised playground, a controlled space in which competitive communities can learn every angle and every corner without variables. **RIGHT** The AWP returns. As in *1.6* and *Source*, it kills in one shot, making it the bane of the easily distracted. A slight concession has been made: move while zoomed in and your down-scope view warps





Joe Danger 2: The Movie

At first glance, *Joe Danger* might look a bit like the younger, quirkier brother of RedLynx's *Trials* games. After all, it's another fast-paced physics gauntlet that's filled with jumps, traps and instant restarts, where a bold approach might shave vital seconds off your time, but a single mistake can lead to your doom. In reality, however, Hello Games is aiming for something a little different. Put a few hours in, and *Joe Danger* reveals itself as an oddball blend of *Mario* and an early *Sonic* game, offering a chunky, high-colour world in which nothing is to be taken too seriously, where secrets are hidden everywhere you might choose to look for them, and where open-ended playfulness never goes unrewarded.

It's an assured blend of influences. From *Sonic*, *Joe Danger* takes a fascination with speed and momentum, along with some curving, loop-heavy levels that feel like 2D Scalextric tracks put together by racing savants. From *Mario*, it borrows a scattershot, almost throwaway approach to new ideas, and a structure that ensures a wide series of objectives are always within reach in each and every stage. Using individual pieces that are rarely more complex than time trials, stunt runs and collectathons, Hello Games somehow manages to build a multitiered framework of fun. And it's one where even if you miss a key objective, it's still worth the race to the finish line to try to grab some of the rest.

This template was laid down in the first game, perhaps, but *Joe Danger 2: The Movie* truly delivers on the premise. The vivid, glossy plastic world is as colourful and cheery as ever, and the same glorious cycle of boosting and tricking still drives the game forward while encouraging endless replays. Everywhere you look, you'll see a design made dense with invention and split-second asides, where you're a monkey in a fez collecting bananas one moment, and a bear on a tricycle chasing after doughnuts the next.

The justification for all this creativity is Joe's latest role as a stuntman for some of the world's weirdest action movies, and it's a conceit that Hello Games really puts to work. Stages have become scenes here, while attempts have become takes, and the bellowing yelps that emanate from your increasingly deranged director achieve delightful heights of exasperation as the scraps on the cutting room floor mount up, threatening to reach truly Kubrickian levels.

Roping in Hollywood has allowed the designers to trigger avalanches and landslides at will, as well as to send in robot armadas and bank robbers to dress its sets, but the new vehicles are the real focus here. Danger's trusty stunt bike has been joined in the garage by everything from four-wheelers and ramshackle mine carts to skis and skidoos, all of which come with their own handling quirks, trick opportunities and flailing animations. The unicycle and the jetpack are probably the most pleasing of the bunch, because they're also the most clearly differentiated: the former's a wonderfully ceaseless micromanagement nightmare as you shift your weight back and forth to survive each treacherous jump, while the latter is pure pinwheeling freedom as you boost, trick and hover across a range of stages that tend to be a little too intricate to be classed as mere tracks any more.

Publisher Microsoft
Developer Hello Games
Format 360
Release Out now

The glorious cycle of boosting and tricking still drives the game forward while encouraging endless replays



THE MAD TOUCH
While *Joe Danger 2* marks the end of the stunt rider's adventures on consoles, the daredevil is already preparing to ride again on iOS. With development led by Steven Burgess, an ex-Frontier designer and the creator of *LostWinds*, *Joe Danger Touch* promises to be a bespoke touchscreen offering rather than a simple port. Moves will all be based on gestures and swipes, and virtual thumbsticks have been ruled out. It will be fascinating to see if the deeper aspects of the stunt system will make the transition, or whether Joe will learn some brand new tricks.

There's plenty of opportunity for strange asides among the secret agent missions, car chases and tomb raids of the main story mode, and the same goes for the separate Deleted Scenes campaign. There are levels that behave like bowling alleys, right down to their glossy arrays of skittles, and there's a hectic BMX-powered stage that works as a prolonged riff on *Paperboy*. The Deleted Scenes are arguably the true heart of the game. A devious blend of advanced tutorial and showboating gauntlet, they're where the stunt system converges with more complex scenarios and high-level controls to reveal a trick racer with some frightening depths.

The Deleted Scenes benefit the most from the expanded array of vehicles, too, since the more competent players out there will be looking for something new to master by now. The whole thing's also enlivened by a Ghost mode that offers a far more tangible sense of how your own skills match up to the rest of the community than gameable leaderboards ever have done. With typical *Joe Danger* showiness, other players' ghosts appear on your screen as shimmering multicoloured comets, and as they streak through your level, they're both an impulse to improve and a nuts-and-bolts guide to some of the most unlikely tactics available. In short, they're a great addition to the chummy atmosphere that Hello Games has already done so much to create in the series.

Elsewhere, multiplayer has grown to incorporate four players, striking a neat balance between carnage and precision as you battle your way to the finish line. Meanwhile, Hello Games has transformed the original game's sandbox mode into a full-blown map editor that blends playing, creating and sharing with an easy kind of elegance.

With its toy box of spare track pieces and its randomly generated level names, the editor is emblematic of a sequel that has layered on the polish without losing the scrappy small-team charm that makes the entire thing worth playing in the first place. *Joe Danger* was always a generous and rather personable affair, and now it's varied and surprisingly sociable as well. Whether you're serious about climbing the leaderboards or just looking to race a teetering cupcake monster around on a pushbike, Hello Games' victory lap has you covered. May the instant restarts never falter. May the boosting never cease.

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RIGHT The jetpack represents *Joe Danger* at its most free-spirited and excessive – you're much more manoeuvrable when moving left and right, and your height is managed with quick boosts



ABOVE Joe's back on two wheels for pursuit levels that rope in cop movie iconography and ramp up the difficulty as you duck and jump your way past obstacles.



LEFT Mine carts can take two hits rather than one, and that allows the designers to offer some truly explosive gauntlets for you to run. Whether it's the ground collapsing beneath you or boulders following hot on your trail, the spirit of Indiana Jones is invoked surprisingly well here

BELOW Props and backdrops have always been a strong point for Hello Games, and the latest *Joe Danger* offers some of the best. The giant robots are a highlight

Post Script

Interview: Sean Murray, managing director, Hello Games

Joe Danger 2 is a happy sort of racer that rather unfortunately appears to be making some people at Hello Games melancholy. Not because the studio's tired of him, though. The Guildford-based outfit has confirmed that *Joe Danger 2: The Movie* will be Joe's big-screen swan song, and the team is clearly sad to say goodbye. We catch up with Hello Games' MD, **Sean Murray**, to find out why the daredevil had to hang up his crash helmet, and why his final lap of the console circuit is such a riot of creativity.



You've said this is the last *Joe Danger* game. The series has been the focus of Hello Games since it was founded. What it's like to leave it behind?
It's both the best and the worst feeling in the world, I think. I feel like we made this decision right at the start to say, "This is going to be the last *Joe Danger*." That sounds like it was a chore to make these games, and it totally wasn't. We said that more to give ourselves motivation: we have to make this the best possible game that we can make. We have to have this feeling that if we have an idea – if we have any kind of concept in this whole genre – we have to put it in this game. That's the mantra: go crazy, and just expand the idea as much as you dream to do.

How do you scope out the breadth of, and set limits for, a development project when squeezing in as much as possible is the underlying principle?
This is one of those questions where the answer is a little bit embarrassing. The answer is that we don't. When we started, we didn't pick an end date for the game. If I had my way, I'd never finish the game. It's just the most pleasant and pleasurable thing to have a core existing mechanic and then just sit down and throw ideas on top of it, and play with new ideas, and not plan – to just have each individual member of the team able to throw their ideas in, too. That's the way we 'managed' it. We don't sit down at the start of the week and say, "We're going to have three of this type of environment and four of this type of vehicle." We do sit down and have ideas and agree among us whether it's a good idea to explore [them], though.

So how can you tell when you're done, and how do you know, even now, that you aren't going to want to make more *Joe Danger* games?
This is why, when we announced that the game had gone gold, everyone else was celebrating and I had this sick feeling in my stomach. I couldn't figure out why. It took me about an hour to realise that it was just a sad thing. We were enjoying what we were doing, and we had made this horrible commitment not to make another one. It's a sad thing, but it's obviously a good thing, because we were having fun making it.

As for deciding when to stop, it's incredibly tough. To balance that unmanaged development style, we go to all these shows like Gamescom and Pax, and we take a full set of levels. Last Gamescom, we took about 60 levels, saw thousands of people play them, and of those 60, we kept about three. That's how the Deleted Scenes [campaign] came about. We'd throw so much away that we'd then fight among each other and decide we had to keep one or two ideas from them. Then you go to your next show, and you keep maybe five or ten of the 60 levels you take there. You get diminishing returns to what you add. We went to Gamescom recently, and it felt final. It felt finished. We just looked at each other and said, "We're done."

"I wish we could bring everyone who follows us on Twitter to the office and have them play the game and throw ideas at us"

You decided to crowd source a lot of your level title puns on Twitter. How did that come about? Were you surprised by the enthusiastic response?
I wish we could do it more. I wish we could bring everyone who follows us on Twitter to the office and have them play the game and throw ideas at us. It bloody amazes me every time we do reach out even in some small way, and you get this incredible response. The truth is, though, that I'd spent all day trying to come up with puns and it's really difficult! I had a list [of] 100 levels and about 70 puns. Only three of them stayed, because everything that came from Twitter was way better. Which is a horrible thought, really. The awful ones are the funniest sometimes. The ones you have to really think about and then say in a funny little accent. One of them, instead of 'Police Academy', was 'Joe-lice Academy'. I said that so many times before it made any sense whatsoever, and now I love it.



Now that *Joe Danger*'s behind you, what are the sort of design issues you're interested in looking at, or game ideas that you'd like to work on, next?
I think something that's really interesting to me, genuinely, is what do indie games become on next-gen platforms? Is there a place for them? At the moment, us indie devs on XBLA and PSN, I think we get away with murder, to be honest. The vast majority of the games are very much inspired by games from 15 years ago. We have a lot of 2D platformers, top-down racing games and things like that, and I don't think those make sense on next-gen any more. I think what might be quite fun to do would be to do something really quite ambitious, since things like PSN and XBLA won't really exist in the future. I think we're going to have to do a very different game – something that's very different to *Joe Danger*. I guess 'broader' would be the word I'd use. ■

Mark Of The Ninja

Klei Entertainment is getting increasingly adept at transplanting 3D action game mechanics into 2D sidescrollers. First came the *Shank* games, which took the combo-building, foe-juggling systems of *Devil May Cry* and flattened them into a tableau of cartoony ultraviolence. *Mark Of The Ninja* does something similar, but its inspiration is the deliberate hunting found in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and *Metal Gear Solid*.

Like the *Arkham* games, this is a stealth title that casts you as a predator. Your ninja is fleet-footed and more than capable of skulking in the shadows, vaulting through levels, and hanging from ceilings. Your quarry, meanwhile, is delightfully stupid – guards will abandon their posts to investigate the slightest hint of a masked, sword-wielding assassin, and are also cursed with the extreme myopia that plagued Shadow Moses' defenders. *Mark Of The Ninja*'s blackly comic heart, meanwhile, is situated at the point where the expansive toolset and your dumbly responsive victims intersect.

While objectives steer you through the levels (which, like *Ninja Gaiden*, offer a hi-tech take on a world full of shuriken and cherry blossom), the real challenge never changes: make it to your goal unseen, optionally leaving a trail of bodies in your wake. Stealth kills are your most potent weapons, and this world is full of carefully placed pools of shadow, hidden perches, and inviting vents to lurk in before executing one. Other toys – smoke bombs, snare traps, throwing darts, noisemakers – allow for playful experimentation with enemies and improvised solutions, and as *Mark Of The Ninja*'s pulpy story builds to a climax, guards steadily build up their repertoire of tricks and defences, too.

A single burst of machine-gun fire can kill you, but *Mark Of The Ninja* makes you as powerful as you are vulnerable. In fact, the game might be too easy if it weren't for the steady drip feed of optional objectives (hide six bodies, make it through a checkpoint without being spotted) and platforming challenges (see 'Jump ninja') to test your ever-increasing range of skills. That said, the focus is definitely on the pleasure of slowly executing every last one of a room's defenders, or luring them into shooting each other out of panicked terror.

Klei's Saturday morning cartoon style visuals intersect smoothly with your ninja's slinky animation and flowing moves, and the range of visual effects (position-betraying lightning strikes, a blurred fog of war-style filter on activity beyond your sight line) folds neatly back into the game's light-and-shadow based stealth systems. The result is a slick and striking game, one with presentation worthy of the potent and flexible set of powers at its core.

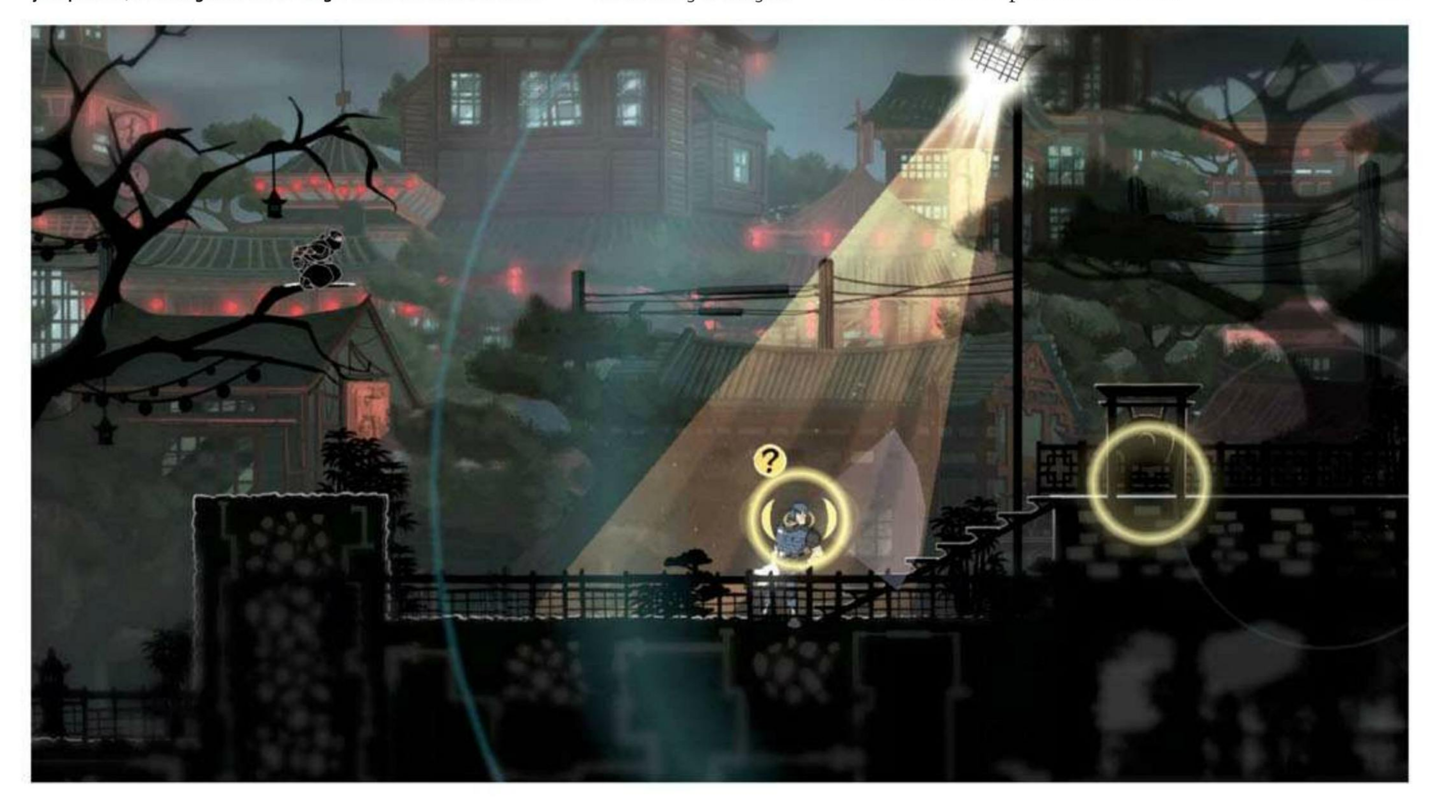
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Publisher Microsoft
Developer Klei Entertainment
Format 360
Release Out now



JUMP NINJA
While *Mark Of The Ninja*'s skillset is clearly designed for stealthy predation, there's also a platformer here with some of *Prince Of Persia*'s supple grace, aided by a right bumper grapple move that's been borrowed from Rocksteady's Batman. Optional challenge rooms deliberately test your acrobatic prowess, hiding chunks of backstory (and experience) behind lattices of lasers that require deft manoeuvring to navigate.

Sounds are visually represented by concentric circles that emanate from the source of noise. This means you can tell at glance if you've given away your position, because guards will be caught within the bubble of sound



Tekken Tag Tournament 2

This time it feels faster. *Tekken 6* died as a spectator sport after Bob, at first glance a morbidly obese take on *Street Fighter*'s Ken, became the default choice for competitive players; at 2011's Evolution championship, half of the eight finalists played as the tubby blonde fighter. But the real difference comes from the return of the tag mechanic 12 years after PS2's *Tekken Tag Tournament*. With players taking two fighters into battle, and switching them mid-combo, it invites comparisons with the recent *Street Fighter X Tekken,* which borrowed the mechanic from Namco.

What results is a forced expansion of *Tekken*'s classic control system: there's still a button for each of your chosen fighter's limbs, but there's now a fifth with which you can switch characters. As in *SFXT*, tagging a partner mid-battle is a risk, and should only be executed when your opponent is on the floor or a significant distance away. Safer options include tag throws – activated with a simultaneous press of tag and right punch – and tag cancels. But the latter, in contrast to *SFXT*'s freeform combo system, can only be performed after a handful of each character's moves.

Tekken 6 introduced the concept of Bound moves, which slam airborne opponents into the ground and keep them in place for long enough for a combo to continue. They're here, too, and are used to set up Tag Assaults, which keep both characters onscreen for a second or two. It's during these brief moments that *Tekken Tag Tournament 2* is at its most stylish.

Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer In-house
Format 360, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now



FIRST RULE OF FIGHT LAB
Fight Lab isn't the series' only new addition. For the first time, opponents can be knocked over railings or through walls and floors, opening up areas and causing a little extra damage. They're new to the series but not, of course, to fighting games – *Dead Or Alive* in particular has been at this for years – and Namco seems to realise just how trivial they are. The developer even calls them, with blunt and refreshing candour, 'stage gimmicks'.

This is a game for old hands, the sole concession to newcomers coming in the form of Fight Lab. It's a tutorial of sorts that puts players in control of Combot, a robotic fighter whose moveset expands as you progress, pilfering from the game's roster of over 50 characters. You'll finish it thinking you've got a good grasp of *TTT2*, but you've not learned how to play the game, just how to play as Combot. Soon, you're locked into the core *Tekken* loop of dipping into the pause menu's command list, experimenting, mucking about, but never being entirely sure you're improving. And now you have to learn two characters, not just one.

For experienced players, though, this is as fluid as *Tekken* has been for years, the tagging doing much to revitalise a combo system that, with its over-reliance on juggles and wall combos, was in danger of growing stale. But it's taken a 12-year-old mechanic to do that, and other games in this increasingly crowded genre boast a deeper level of mechanical complexity as well as a more generous welcome to newcomers. With the back catalogue pilfered, the lingering question is where the series can possibly go from here.





After you tag in your partner, both of your characters are onscreen and vulnerable for a split second. It's for this reason that tags should be used sensibly and sparingly – get it wrong and you will take heavy damage

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Dead Or Alive 5

Outfits that would make your grandmother faint, stages that throb with colour and detail, and simple inputs that belie a deep system of counters and combos. Since its 1996 debut, *Dead Or Alive* has established itself as one of the glitziest, most bombastic 3D fighters on the market. On first contact, *Dead Or Alive 5* looks to continue the tradition, but there are subtle, divisive changes here.

Story mode is the biggest departure. It's now a sprawling timeline of bite-sized cutscenes containing short matches that act as basic tutorials for entry-level players. The narrative is a tiresome, comical soap opera that falls flat, with poor performances and contrived conflicts. Arcade mode, however, is damaged by the loss of the lush, joyous cutscenes of previous games (no doubt due to the resources being spent on Story mode instead), while the rest of the package – Survival, Time Attack and Versus – plays it safe.

The fighting system has been carried over near wholesale from *DOA4*. This is no bad thing, but the new Power Blows, which you can use to launch an opponent into the scenery when you're below 50 per cent health, prove disorienting, breaking a fight's flow as the camera shifts momentarily to frame a dramatic view.

Some of *DOA*'s main attractions have always been the weird, wonderful stages, and it's a shame to see *DOA5* opt mostly for a bland industrial theme, as the team dedicates its attention to heightened character detail

Publisher Tecmo Koei
Developer Team Ninja
Format 360, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now (US, Japan), September 28 (EU)



FREE FOR ALL
As with *Ninja Gaiden 3*, a new level of accessibility has been brought to *DOA5*, with moves optionally displayed during fights to help newcomers, and the lengthy, laborious Story mode acting as an entry point for the uninitiated. There are also eight difficulty levels to choose from, the toughest of which, Legend, feels like the relentless, punishing AI is reading your moves, and will deter all but the biggest gluttons for punishment.

Where *DOA4*'s backdrops often upstaged the cast with their distracting beauty, *DOA5* is all about the heaving, high-flying bodies. The optional new 'action' camera zooms in to punctuate critical hits, and cranes around counters and for specials to show off some stellar modelling – fighters get progressively grubbier and sweatier as bouts continue. However, it also serves to highlight some choppy animation that prevents battles from flowing as freely and dynamically as before.

New characters Rig, a taekwondo tough, and Mila, an MMA master, reinforce the sense of a more realist take on combat with their relatively authentic movesets and more grounded attire and stages. Then there are four *Virtua Fighter* characters to unlock. The presence of Akira, Sarah, Pai and Gen Fu is jarring, uniting two genre strands that are worlds apart in their treatment of competitive martial arts. Regardless of their heritage, their styles slip into *DOA5*'s roster surprisingly well: Sarah's long reach and aggressive attacks offer a mix of Jann Lee's long kicks and Hitomi's snappy jabs, while Akira, Pai and Gen Fu feel closer to Leifang and Kokoro in their guarded, hard-to-read stances.

For all Team Ninja's talk of keeping it more real, *DOA5* is mostly business as usual. There are tweaks to the formula and aesthetic, but nothing too sacrilegious or enticing. It's disappointing, then, that this has little to offer over its forebear.

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Super Hexagon

Publisher Distractionware/Terry Cavanagh
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

Maybe the pulsing spin cycle and morphing neon palette of *Super Hexagon* is communicating something via hypnotic suggestion, but it's nothing reassuring. Don't look for tenderness here. There's only one-more-go fiendishness on offer. And an infectious chiptune soundtrack by Chipzel to keep you from chafing against the hockey-stick-shaped learning curve.

You control a tiny arrow, sliding it along a fixed circular arc while varying arrays of lines glide – or, later on, careen – towards the hexagonal vortex at the centre of the screen. The aim is to avoid collision with them by rotating clockwise or anti-clockwise, depending on which side of the screen you press. Survive for 60 seconds and you complete the stage, but the tempo lurches into fast-forward.

The more second nature the pattern of thumb presses become – some hen-pecking staccato, others lingering on the screen a half-second or so – the more you begin to feel like a virtuosic sight-reading percussionist. The most memorable gauntlet involves a spiralling corkscrew that you can only negotiate by jamming your thumb against the screen for an extended beat. Then it's straight into the next trick, and the next.

Super Hexagon weds Zen-like design purity with the highest order of twitch-reflex athleticism. It revels in the ineffable dance of muscle memory, the act of shutting off your brain and trusting your thumbs to guide you to safety. Forget *VVVVVV*. This is Terry Cavanagh's masterpiece.

9



Bad Hotel

Publisher Lucky Frame
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

Part tower defence, part procedural music generator, *Bad Hotel* resembles nothing so much as the fever dream of an art deco architect, with its crisply elegant geometric shapes and gaudy pastel shades. At times it's a rather haphazard construction, unbalanced and ready to topple over, but it feels unlike anything else on the App Store. It's almost worth downloading for one of the most stylish home screen icons we've ever seen.

Your task is to protect a building from the minions of a malevolent hotelier by placing square rooms around it. The basic rooms offer a fairly weak barrier but double as money generators for offensive options such as turrets, freeze rays and cannons. Another room gradually heals any buildings crumbling under the relentless assault from the bizarre collection of creatures sent to demolish them. Meanwhile, each new room adds extra beats and tones to the soundtrack, creating a percussive soundscape whose insistent thuds and chimes prove oddly unsettling.

Survive a stage and you're awarded a score, but it's clear Lucky Frame has no interest in rewarding good performances with stars or medals, nor in punishing lucky escapes with a lower ranking. Similarly, there are no tutorials, hints or clues; each new room type arrives with nothing more than a brief description and a tacit encouragement to experiment. Messy but oddly mesmeric, *Bad Hotel* is perhaps more successful as a curious plaything than a game, but it's no less essential for that.

7



Gasketball

Publisher Mikengreg
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

Above all else, the duo behind Mikengreg are masters of the simple sound effect. In *Gasketball*, the knockabout pleasures of backyard basketball are invoked via the hollow thunk of rubber on concrete, and an ascending scale as your points rack up.

Not that *Gasketball* could truly be considered a basketball game in the first place, of course. Rather, this is a pared-back shot-matching challenge in which you fling your ball through complex 2D gauntlets, rebounding from flippers, slipping in and out of magical portals, and ducking around spinning saw blades in order to get to the net.

It's more technical than it sounds, with scores building up if you hit the right surfaces in the right order, and it's wonderfully sociable, too, providing g-ballers everywhere with a frantic local one-on-one mode that divides the iPad screen in two. There's also an asynchronous online offering in which you build levels for other players to beat before tackling the horrors they've constructed in return.

Blending freewheeling creativity with arcade precision (and chucking a decent solo campaign in among all the multiplayer elements), *Gasketball* wraps things up with sweet and personable art design that revels in rich colours, cranky robots and plenty of thick black lines. It's a smart iOS game that can reduce a sport to its basic elements like this – and an even smarter one that can then turn those elements into something that feels entirely new.

8



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science, and business of making games

What links an LA airport terminal with Lara Croft? This issue's People, Places, Things gets underway on p116 with the answer to that question: designer Phil Campbell, who across a remarkable career has pitched a carpark to EuroDisney, brought The Godfather to consoles and pretended to be David Bowie. We then dive into the risky world of retail with the tale of *Spelunky's* shops on p118, taking our chances with the ornery shopkeepers. On p120, Things examines how Niko Bellic's mobile phone bridges the gap between our world and his more violent one. Studio Profile on p122 finds us paying a visit to Media Molecule, which has developed the likes of *LittleBigPlanet* and is currently making *Tearaway* for Vita. In The Making Of... on p126, we face up to the God King of *Infinity Blade*, and how Chair Entertainment summoned him in five weeks. The Art Of... on p130 embraces the static lighting and megatextures of id Software's *Rage*, a game that tried to look its best on multiple platforms. Our Create columnists take the final word, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p134) warning of the dangers of no-brainers, while Valve's Clint Hocking (p136) defends design documentation, even if some of it is really bad fiction. Indie developer Randy Smith (p138) ponders the creation of universal truths while exploring a game system, and writer James Leach (p140) searches the Internet for quirky originality, and laments that his fingers are not as young as they once were.



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More development news, analysis and reviews



Sackboy may have to move aside for an envelope-headed new mascot. See p122 for more



People

PHIL CAMPBELL

From LAX to Lara, there's much more to this designer than meets the eye

"I have a system of half-remembering things," laughs Campbell. "It's great. I've found that if you half-remember something, it's more pliable. You can shape it"

Picking through **Phil Campbell**'s resumé is a bit like playing a bullet hell shooter: his work history seems to be composed of anything and everything, and it comes at you from all directions. As an architect, he started his career sketching out coffee bars, chain restaurants and resorts such as Legoland. He also designed part of the Tom Bradley Terminal at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), and he pitched what was then Euro Disney a car park in which vehicles were arranged according to their colour. Later, once his imagination had taken him from the real world to the virtual one, he found work with the likes of David Cage, James Bond and Lara Croft. As creative director on *The Godfather: The Game* for EA, he was present at Marlon Brando's last-ever recording session, and when he was attached to *Omikron: The Nomad Soul*, he would regularly moonlight for David Bowie during print interviews.

He's worked in America and his native UK, and he's been a teenage poet and a successful comic-book author. He's made games for PC, consoles, and now iOS, dealing with licences as varied as Nip/Tuck, *The Sims* and Evanescence. It's dizzying stuff, but look between the names and, as with any decent bullet hell shooter, order slowly starts to emerge from the chaos. The job changes, but Campbell doesn't – he approaches each commission with the same distinct technique.

"It always starts on paper," says Campbell. "I'm not the greatest artist in the world, but I realised early on that if I could graphically portray my ideas quickly in drawings, cartoons – in flow – I could get them down as I'm having them. I'll start a page with no idea where I'm going, and I'll start structuring, and I'll redo stuff. I'll do a page every two minutes. That lays bare the design process for your bosses, your public, and even your own team."

Starting with paper allows collaborators a way into the project from an extremely early stage, in fact. "A lot of the things I have to do, I have to be the genesis of," says Campbell. "Bing Gordon at EA called my work 'totems'. I'd do these crazy giant drawings that would just evolve from A3 sheets, and then the team would gather around them like a hot fire. They were done very quickly, so the team might like them, reject them, add to them. They weren't so prissy or finished that the team didn't feel they could deface them. I look upon the people I work with as a malleable resource, and I try to let them be as creative as possible."

What often unfolds on these huge sheets of paper is a grand scheme that Campbell refers to as his 'hidden narrative' system. "When I come up with an idea, I try to create a hidden narrative in my head," he says. "Back when I was on *Tomb Raider Gold*, I was looking for classic story structures that had waypoints that I could use, for example. With that game, I came up with this idea that I'd turn to my bookcase and think of a book that would relate to the design I was doing – I had some book about pirating or adventure. I'd go to that book and then I'd look at the books on either side. It just happened that the book was between two pop-up books: The Wizard Of Oz and Alice In Wonderland. I started thinking about Alice In Wonderland, and I started thinking about the waypoints in this *Tomb Raider* game based on Alice's story. I soon had a tea party, and I had an Egyptian god who became the equivalent of the queen. It just allowed me to focus on new ideas for those great *Tomb Raider* set-pieces, and then you could better figure out where they were in space and how to connect them."

If a synthesis of Lewis Carroll and Lara Croft seems unlikely, it's nothing compared to some of Campbell's later output. Working as a creative director at EA in 2003, he ended up blending 007 with golf course design.

"We're trying to drag things back to the physical world, taking some of the virtual with us"

"I'm from Portrush, which is fairly big in the golfing world," laughs Campbell. "I've often felt that a game level should drop you in, and you should be able to see your eventual destination, a bit like a good course. In the build-up to *Everything Or Nothing*, we wanted to create a sense that Bond could travel the world and do anything, and we came up with this notion of golf holes: there's the mission, there's the flag for the end, there's hazards and traps and different elevations. Then you position your player at the tee and give them a bag of clubs, which are the mechanics for how to play the game. I don't tell them how to play: give them the mechanics and let them decide. It gives you more of a feeling of an open world where you can make your own decisions, but at the same time, we didn't have to actually make an open world. You get a great balance between scripting and autonomy."

Fittingly, there's a hidden narrative to Campbell's own career, too – one that's only become obvious since recent work with his new company Inlifesize has lead him to embrace augmented reality technology. "I've come full circle now, to be honest," he sighs. "I spent all that time in the physical world creating buildings at the start, and since 1996 I've spent time in the virtual world with all the triple-A titles. Now I've got my independent studio and we're trying to go physical again. We're trying to drag things back to the physical world, taking some of the virtual with us. It's about trying to get out of the digital straitjacket, trying to make something that can only work locally with friends and family."

Inlifesize was founded in 2011 by Campbell and Greg Maguire. The latter's "an alumnus of Disney, ILM, Harry Potter, Avatar. We wondered what would happen if we took his film world, my game world, and a little architecture on the side. We call the company Inlifesize, because it's about creating things that are the right size for your life. We're not using words like 'social' and we're certainly not using 'gamification'. We hate the word 'augmented,' too. We like to use 'enhanced' or 'enchanted' reality."

Campbell admits Inlifesize has started small with a children's app called Fairy Magic, which was partly paid for by Northern Ireland Screen Fund. "The idea was to take the fairies, mix them with the technology so they can live around you, put in a little bit of game design – collection, catching games – and do this as a demonstration.

"Our end objective is to make meaningful experiences for your first life in some way, not some meaningless second life," concludes Campbell. "You can feel trapped in the digital. I just felt: 'If I can get back out into the physical world where I started with architecture, I can create stuff that affects people's lives.' It feels so good to be back in the physical world now, but with everything I've learned from the videogame world, too." ■

CV

URL www.philcampbelldesign.com
Selected Softography *Tomb Raider Gold* (1998), *Omikron: The Nomad Soul* (1999), *James Bond: Everything Or Nothing* (2004), *Indigo Prophecy* (2005), *The Godfather: The Game* (2006), *Contract Killer* (2011)










Places

SPELUNKY'S SHOPS

In Derek Yu's world, retail therapy always comes at a price

Spelunky's so in love with shopping that one of its biggest secrets is essentially nothing more than a giant mall where you can find the game's most coveted items

From *Spelunky*
Developer Mossmouth
Origin US
Debut 2008

As mechanics go, it's one of the oldest around: you gather loot, and then spend it. You save, and then you splurge. In games, shops and shopkeepers date back to the early days of pen-and-paper RPGs, but they've been steadily spreading outwards for years, moving from the cavernous pits of *Diablo* to the wilds of *Far Cry 2*'s jungles, and even turning up in the cluttered and ad-riddled menus of most contemporary freemium iOS titles. Strike gold, and you'll almost always strike stores to use it in; buying stuff is an aspect of the real world that we repeatedly seem to recreate inside the virtual.

Spelunky's no stranger to bullion and jewels, of course, but its shops have a far more complex appeal than most. They're randomised, for starters, which should explain why so many players decide that they're worth a dangerous detour across a busy map. They're deadly, too, and that might account for the fact that you so often find yourself holding your breath when you step inside. A spin of the wheel, a squeeze of the trigger: in these ramshackle markets you can find the entire appeal of Derek Yu's masterpiece squashed down into a single room – a room that could provide you with everything, but could just as easily take it all away again.

Judged by almost any yardstick, *Spelunky* is a hard game. Its jungles are filled with toxic snails and pits of glinting spikes, while its ice caverns are riddled with yeti and aliens, neither of which are inclined to be friendly. This is a journey that might terminate in the stomach of a killer plant or underneath a boulder, but you're just as likely to be frogged to death, or to expire after the blunt trauma caused by a pebble that you hurled across the screen rebounding into you. While you can teach yourself some of the underlying rules – when to risk stealing a golden idol, how best to avoid the dreaded ghost – *Spelunky*'s procedurally constructed levels mean you'll rarely come across exactly the same situation twice, and you'll never be precisely sure what manner of challenge lurks around the next corner.

In such an unforgiving setting, shouldn't shops become oases of hope? Sometimes, as it happens, they do. Lives are short and the gear you carry makes all the difference – and, thanks to stock randomisation, even the very first vendors might well be selling the most powerful gadgets *Spelunky* has to offer. You just need either the cash or the guts to lay your hands on their wares.



Shop types may be subject to random chance, but *Spelunky*'s shopkeepers all behave the same way when they're challenged

Even when they aren't packing game-changers such as the jetpack or shotgun, even the lamest store will still enable you to restock with the bombs and ropes that could see you surviving for at least another level or two. Experienced spelunkers know how to read these scrambled inventories; they realise that shops aren't just a sudden burst of good fortune or a welcome chance to gather your thoughts. Rather, they're a rare known point in an uncertain world, an opportunity to gauge how likely you are to succeed once you throw yourself back into the fray.

Thanks to stock randomisation, even the very first vendors might well be selling the most powerful gadgets

This doesn't explain why *Spelunky*'s shops so often become flashpoints for violence, however, or why you'll frequently enter accompanied by a sudden spike in the pulse, and exit with handfuls of warm buckshot lining your stomach. The bloodletting isn't down to the rarity of shops, or even due to the shuffled selection of items on offer. Instead, it springs directly from *Spelunky*'s magnificent even-handedness. You can steal from the game's shops if you can't afford the wares they're selling. You can rush in, grab things, and then try to make good your escape.

It's not easy, though. It was never going to be easy amid this Newton's cradle of actions and reactions. Since you're free to steal, shopkeepers are free to retaliate – and they always do, guns blazing and legs pedalling. Even the most innocent of players will sense the hair-trigger tempers lurking behind those bearded frontier faces, or spot something grim and untoward in the way they scurry up close (at least on PC) whenever you select an item to purchase – greedy, undoubtedly, but also suspicious.

If you do try to run, shopkeepers are powerful enemies, and the volleys of lead they fling your way are just one more reminder that everything in *Spelunky* has consequences, whether you're pinching an idol, or sparing a caveman who then pummels you into the ground. Escape, and you'll find the fun isn't over. Shopkeepers bear grudges that will last a lifetime: steal from one, and the rest swear bloody revenge.

Ask Yu and he'll tell you that the shops were part of his earliest designs for *Spelunky*. Their simmering owners emerged from the game's origins as a Rogue-like, where stealing is often entirely acceptable – as is then killing those caught in the act. The genius, though, is that *Spelunky*'s a Rogue-like that passes itself off as a platformer, and platformers tend to have their own far more law-abiding customs when it comes to the exchange of in-game loot. Ultimately, shops are a junction point between twin influences: a single location with two very different traditions. The Rogue-like tradition wins out, because it offers the most interesting results. And the most inclusive.

Ask yourself, then: why does man steal? Perhaps out of desperation, out of desire, or out of an impulse to keep things interesting. With a few lines of code, *Spelunky* manages to cover all of these options – and offers a pay-off that's as entertaining as it is inspired. ■



Things

NIKO'S PHONE

How a pocket-sized chunk of plastic grounds Rockstar's opus in the modern world

Niko's phone serves to reflect his personality, but its effect on you is also a mirror. Are you frustrated by its constant intrusion into your game, or glad of the interactions it brings?

Anyone who makes the erroneous claim that videogames are all about 'escapism' probably hasn't powered on their game console in several years. We're always online now, our activities broadcast to whoever cares to look. The theory is that we want to be social, that we're entirely happy with being reachable no matter where we are or what we're doing. Why else would we carry mobile phones with us at all times?

When players expressed outrage that Niko was constantly being called by his friends in *Grand Theft Auto IV*, that he seemed unable to escape a constant barrage of requests to compete in minigames and scope out several pairs of 'beeeeg Emerican teeeettees,' it was, in part, a declaration of their frustrations with the modern world. The increased social awareness of our gameplay has gone hand in hand with a loss of privacy in our lives. Niko's phone, and the inundation of calls he receives from his friends and business contacts, remind us of how much our personal spaces have truly eroded.



Reference is made to Niko having flown a helicopter and driven a tank, so using a mobile phone shouldn't pose a problem

Indeed, Niko's phone is all about the divide between personal and public space. It's rare in the pantheon of videogame objects in that it serves three different functions and appears in three different ways: it exists within the world, serving the fiction; it exists within the HUD, providing realtime information; and it exists as part of the UI as a method of choosing options. Just what is Niko seeing, you wonder, as you're scrolling through the game's multiplayer settings? The screen is a contested space in *GTAIV* – there's no clear way for Niko to comprehend his exact ammo count, nor see the GPS available to the player at all times – and yet the phone appears both onscreen and in Niko's hand at the same time once you press the button to pull it out.

Niko's phone is but a small piece of the American Dream he so desperately chases throughout GTAIV

When you enter into a multiplayer game, the phone becomes a communication tool, used for contacting other players. It's an obvious yet clever gameplay device, but it's also a way for the game to signify that Niko's phone is, in part, the player's phone. It's telling that it's used in a way that alters the privacy of your space into the shared space of multiplayer, moving you into the kind of shared environment of disembodied voices that tends to make players acutely aware of their surroundings.

This isn't the only way in which the device is shared between player and avatar. When you change the background or ringtone on Niko's phone, he doesn't express any sort of enthusiasm over it. He doesn't seem the type of person who gives a damn about these sorts of things, but the game realises that you might be. Call up 948-555-0100 and the folks at ZiT will identify the song playing on the radio, an action that can only possibly benefit you. The phone is also where you go to activate codes, both complicated (typing in long chains of numbers activates various cheats that disable your Achievements) and simple (call 911 if your car won't start and the engine magically comes back to life). This streamlines a process that was tucked away in the menus in the older games, but by using this device, it also means that you don't have to leave the game world to make such changes. These codes are typed in on the screen space between the game world and the player; you're within Liberty City as you alter it, and you never leave Niko behind, because mobile phones are all about being constantly connected.

Just as in the real world, the phone is a symbol as well as a communication device, and your social standing isn't necessarily dictated entirely by your contact list. The protagonists of the Episodes From Liberty City expansions carry phones as well, and each one says something about the individual holding it. Niko's final phone (designed by Whiz, a pastiche of various American mobile companies) is the sort of reliable but unspectacular prepaid model that was all but off the market by 2010. *The Lost And Damned*'s Johnny Klebitz still holds on to a beaten-up chunky phone, the kind designed to withstand a lot of damage. Meanwhile, *The Ballad Of Gay Tony*'s Luis Lopez has a touchscreen model that would have still been considered fancy when the expansion shipped in late 2009.

Niko's phone is but a small piece of the American Dream he so desperately chases throughout the game, Johnny's is a reminder of just how often he's come off his bike, and Luis's is fully in line with that expansion's psychotic recession-proof opulence. Each portion of *Grand Theft Auto IV* has a lot to say about how these characters have interpreted their place in Liberty City, but you need look no further than their phones to get a good idea of where they stand.

For many, Niko's phone was emblematic of everything that the *Grand Theft Auto* series had lost in its transition to the current console generation. The relationships that Niko mostly appreciates and enjoys, and the phone calls that come from them, can be a burden for a player who simply wants to gallivant around the city, joyriding and blowing up cop cars. But the phone is a reminder, too, that Niko isn't alone in Liberty City, and that the city doesn't belong to him, nor Johnny, Luis, or even you as the player. In a game where anonymous pedestrians can be mowed down with little repercussion, it's the phone that best reminds us, and Niko, that we're all connected. ■



STUDIO PROFILE

Media Molecule

Guildford's handicraft heroes excel at making big games with little teams, but having enormous backers helps

1 Sackboy's textures and outfits may change, but his silhouette remains instantly recognisable. He's sweet, but there's also something surprisingly realistic about the grubbiness of his skin.
2 *Tearaway*'s origami creations are all plausible pieces of papercraft in their own right, and can be recreated in real life

Back when Media Molecule was at work on the first *LittleBigPlanet*, its offices were a congregation of dark, sweaty rooms above a shop in the suburbs of Guildford. It was a dingy, poorly ventilated place befitting a software startup, but the 27-strong team still decorated, covering the walls with gaudy art and stringing fairy lights across the lobby, spelling out 'hello' in crazy joined-up writing.

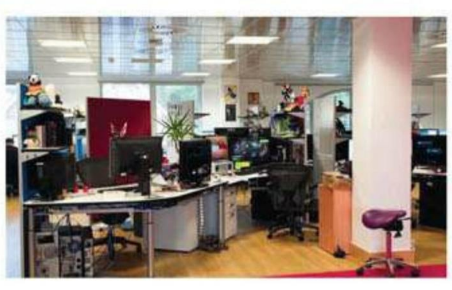
Six years and a sequel later, Media Molecule is now owned by Sony and boasts a team of 47, split across two projects. Its new workspace is located in a plushly impersonal office block in the centre of town. If the team's old digs resembled a ramshackle tree house, the new ones look like, well, a development studio. There's decent lighting and functioning air conditioning, and there are meeting rooms decked out with whiteboards and teleconferencing equipment.

Move in close, though, and the handicraft – and perhaps hand-to-mouth – spirit of the early days survives. Origami models clutter every window ledge, while retro lampshades hang from the ceiling and friendly looking mismatched armchairs lurk in conspiratorial gatherings. There's a little door off the main floor marked 'Super Secret Cupboard', and there's a whole room reserved for weekly life-drawing classes, its walls covered with beautiful charcoal sketches. Even a bundle of old network cables looks artful here, its multicoloured tangles echoing the snarls and curves of the huge Jon Burgerman print in the hallway beyond. The tree house isn't gone, it's just evolved. So has the team that built it.

"Peter Molyneux was the first person to play LittleBigPlanet… he told us it was too ambitious"

Founded by Mark Healey, **Alex Evans**, **David Smith** and Kareem Ettouney, all of whom met while working at Lionhead Studios, Media Molecule was formed in 2006. The group came together to help Healey with his weekend project, a fighting game called *Rag Doll Kung Fu*. The work proved to be fun, and indie development was becoming increasingly appealing. Unlike so many startups, in other words, the team had a company before it had a game.

The game wasn't very far behind, however. After a few months of coding, and the addition of a studio director in the form of Criterion's **Siobhan Reddy**, Media Molecule had a prototype that would eventually form the basis of *LittleBigPlanet*. Armed with a laptop, Healey and Evans went back to Lionhead to ask their old boss for his opinion. "Peter Molyneux was the first person outside the company to play *LittleBigPlanet*," laughs technical director Evans. "We let him see it, and he told us it was too ambitious."



Is this Media Molecule's office, or is it Etsy's? It can be hard to tell with the mixed-media artworks and the knitted models

It was too ambitious, of course: both a platformer and a tool for making platform games, all wrapped up in a patchwork art style that skilfully kept itself on just the right side of terminal tweeness. Ambition was part of the plan, in fact. "There are these different options, I guess," says Evans. "Some people start with a safe small project and then grow, and that's a valid route. We were aiming high. We always knew we wanted to do this massive gigantic triple-A tentpole PS3 title. What we didn't know was that we'd succeed."

It's hard to imagine a more high-profile debut than *LittleBigPlanet*'s, announced on stage at GDC 2007 by then-SCEE executive vice president Phil Harrison. "It was terrifying," laughs Reddy. "What we showed on the stage was pretty much everything we had. Every byte we had ever written."

"It was also exciting, though," chips in technical director Smith. "We still didn't know what the game was going to be when it became public. In terms of the Play, Create, Share details, we didn't know what Create meant, or what Share meant. The fact that we ended up with something where you could make these large levels from scratch? We initially thought that maybe the creativity was playing a level and just messing it up. That was fun enough."

LittleBigPlanet was to go through major changes before release, all while under the harsh scrutiny that comes with life as a PS3 exclusive. "The Create version one that we had greenlit inside Sony within six months was purely physical," remembers Evans. "You pushed a button, and were pulled into an alternate universe where there were paint cans that you had to run over and pick up, and then you pushed the button

Mm

Founded 2006
Employees 47
Key staff Mark Healey (creative director), Alex Evans (technical director), Dave Smith (technical director), Kareem Ettouney (art director), Siobhan Reddy (studio director)
URL www.mediamolecule.com
Selected softography *LittleBigPlanet*, *LittleBigPlanet 2*
Current projects *Tearaway* (Vita), unannounced R&D project

again and you were back in the original level. If you wanted to paint up high, you had to get someone with a jetpack to lift you in co-op."

"It was interesting, really," says Smith. "It was really fun, and it was all grounded in gameplay, and it was quite intuitive, but the results were crap. You could make stuff, but it would never be any good." Eventually, the physicality was dialled down, the Popit menu was introduced, and works of real complexity became possible. When *LittleBigPlanet* launched, the team could boast that all of the campaign levels were built with the same tools that the players would use to create and share their own stages.

As the first mainstream console title to hinge on user-generated content, launching *LittleBigPlanet* was only the start of the process, and the challenges inherent with nurturing the game's community proved far harder than expected. "With *LittleBigPlanet 2*, there's more than 200 products on the store and DLC," says Evans. "We've worked with other studios like Tarsier and Fireproof, and that was a learning experience, too. The sheer rate of release was terrifying. We were patching and patching, and we weren't just fixing bugs, we were adding things. It was actually a shock through the chain all the way from us to the PSN Store guys. Nothing in PlayStation was really built for this. We lost a year to it, a whole year that was just grind – loving grind – to keep things going."

Following a successful sequel and millions of user-generated levels, *LittleBigPlanet* is now managed by what Evans refers to as a "virtual studio" made up of people spread across Sony and various other developers. Media Molecule's still involved, of course, but the studio is also free to focus on new projects – such as *Tearaway* – all without growing too large in the process, or losing its small-team spirit.





Vita-exclusive *Tearaway*'s thematic consistency hasn't resulted in a game that seems stuck in an artistic design rut. It turns out that you really can make almost anything out of paper, including forests, full-on phantasmagorias and even, as seen on p122, polka-dot reindeer

"Being small's been so important," says Evans. "There have been moments when that has been absolutely pivotal to making it through. Game development is very hard. The fact that we all sit together and eat together makes it easier. It sounds romantic, but it's actually useful at the most grotty moments: the bits that you skip over in the documentary, when all it is is people late at night, tired, emotional… and trying not to melt down."

Sony acquired Media Molecule in 2010. For such a close-knit team, was that a hard decision to make? "No," says Evans. "It was brilliant. We were really happy working with Sony, and I was really bored of trying to work out what the alternative was. It's like when you buy a house. You feel like you should go and look at lots of houses before you go and get the massive mortgage and then commit yourself to the hell of paying the bank. The scary thing with Sony was that they were our first choice, and we'd never looked at anything else. Because of that, Siobhan and I spent a year looking at other options. At the end of it, we went, 'You know what? It's fine.' I mean, I've coded pretty much constantly for the last two years now, and not had to spend my time worrying about other things. For example, Double Fine have done amazingly, but the effort they've put in just to do the sequence of games they've done since *Brütal Legend*, and then the Kickstarter? I'm so in awe of them, because I just don't have the energy for that."

Two years on, and Media Molecule seems comfortable with its owners, even in the light of the closure of Liverpool Studio. "We've had a lot of luck with champions," admits Evans. "Phil Harrison. Pete Smith, an XDev producer, he's always been very good. When we had to delay the second game past Christmas, that wasn't an easy decision for somebody in his position. He had to give up his bonus, his department was more screwed than we were, but he helped us make that decision and backed us.

"Then *Tearaway*, our new Vita game, had Shuhei Yoshida, the president of Sony's Worldwide Studios," he laughs. "We weren't planning to show *Tearaway* at Gamescom. We had no logo, no name. Then we did an internal update where we said, 'Hey guys, you're here so we might as well show you the latest build.' Shuhei was like, 'Right, we'll show this at Gamescom.' I think that kind of risk-taking helps us to keep a kind of indie process now, the same as when we were just Media Molecule on our own. I feel like our internal process is still staunchly indie, but it's enabled by Sony. The best experiences with Sony are when they're taking risks. There's this weird balance between them taking risks and them saying, 'You've got to ship, otherwise there's no point in doing this.' Sony, more than any other big publisher, have got that tension really right."

"We had a game jam built around Vita-ness. Suddenly, the game was taking shape"

"The other positive from Sony is that we're pretty good at working within restrictions," says Reddy. "Taking decisions off our plate is great. When we have constraints, we're really good at going wild within those constraints."

"Being single platform is a case in point," agrees Evans. "We started Media Molecule as a single-platform company. We just didn't want to go multiplatform as an engineering choice. Everyone at the time was bitching about how hard the Cell is to code for. It is hard. It's enjoyably hard. But it's only really hard if you're trying to make an Xbox and a Wii game at the same time. If you're willing to start a company with a blank slate, no legacy code, no hungry artists? We had the best opportunities of anyone. As a company, constraints like that have really helped us to be creative."

Tearaway is a great example of these constraints at work, in fact. A papercraft action-adventure in the spirit of *Zelda*, it's built entirely around the peculiar inputs of the Vita, with AR elements that encourage an intersection of real and virtual worlds, and the rear touchpad allowing players to poke their fingers into the game itself. Vita didn't just shape the basic idea for *Tearaway*; it proved essential in sharpening the concepts. "The scope exploded very early on," admits Evans. "It was basically every game and every genre simultaneously, and also all of *LittleBigPlanet* and all of Twitter and Foursquare. What you did and how you did it – all of these questions were starting to get us stuck. Then we had a game jam built around Vita-ness. Suddenly, with those restrictions in place, the world was taking shape, the game was taking shape."

Today, Media Molecule is split into separate teams, and that's raised some entirely new challenges. "There are three main groups now: there's *Tearaway*; there's our second project, an unannounced R&D project; and then there's a studio team that looks after the running of everything," says Reddy. "One discussion we've been making recently is whether people can work on multiple projects. Everybody likes working together, and everyone first and foremost is a Molecule. The first way we'll try this is mixing up the seating a bit. The idea of having two teams is great, but you don't want to make the entire studio feel like it's carved in half. At the very least, you still want people be able to share ideas."

"An interesting thing about Media Molecule is that we actually enjoy tearing everything up and doing something we couldn't have imagined doing before, though" says Evans. "That's the positive to all this. As a studio, we want to keep everything fresh. We don't just want to be known as the *LittleBigPlanet* studio, much as we love that. I think of Media Molecule more as creative gaming. For *Tearaway*, we've imagined creative gaming within a much more gamey game. For the R&D project, it's creative gaming: go back to those two words and completely reimagine how people can create. It's scary, but it's exhilarating."

He pauses and frowns. "In fact, I really hope Peter Molyneux comes over to play our new game and says it's too ambitious again." ■



Q&A

Alex Evans
Co-founder and technical director

Is it true that when you left Lionhead, you resigned on Mark Healey's behalf?
Dave, Mark and I had been working together on a project called The Room. That was an R&D project at Lionhead. I'd been trying to persuade them to leave for ages so we could do our own thing, and we'd been helping Mark with *Rag Doll Kung Fu* in our spare time. So we were crunching on *Fable* at the same time as finishing *Rag Doll* [and] at the same time as working on this R&D project. I basically said to Peter Molyneux, 'I want to leave to do a startup with these guys, and they all want to leave with me.' He said, 'Can you stay until Christmas, because of something I can't tell you about?' I didn't know, but that something was selling the company to Microsoft, I guess. I was more than happy, because we all loved our jobs. I said, 'We're not in any rush. We'll stay to Christmas.'

Were you nervous?
Mark was. One day, Mark said, 'I'm not sure about this. I want to go on holiday. I love Lionhead; I'm not sure I want to leave.' Then it was the first day of the holiday, and Peter came in and said, 'Screw it, leave now. You want to do your thing, pack your desks.' And we said, 'But Mark's gone on holiday to find himself, and we're not even sure he wants to do this.' He said, 'No, out.' I had to call Mark and say, 'Look, Peter's made this decision for you.' Mark had sort of agreed to leave eventually, but he had a wobble. Clarity came in the form of Peter, thankfully. He was so good about it. I remember when we told him we were thinking of leaving, he said, 'Oh thank God, I thought you were going to get a job at Valve or something. If you were going to another developer, I would have been cross, because I would have thought, 'Is Lionhead not good enough for you?' Because you're doing a startup, you're insane, but good luck.'

How did *LittleBigPlanet* come together?
We got together a demo called *Yellowhead*. There was a lot of Lionhead and Bullfrog in it, a lot of *Rag Doll Kung Fu* in it, and then a lot of Dave's physics in it. Dave had done this 2D physics engine that was the foundation of *LittleBigPlanet*. It predates Box2D, but you can see by analogy what Box2D has done to the indie scene. As young indies, we latched on to the same thing that many of the next generation of indies have latched on to, which is that 2D physics is really fertile, from *Angry Birds* to… everything. The rewards system on the Starbucks app seems to use Box2D, by the looks of it.

What Kareem brought to it was the miniature world idea, Dave brought the physics, and then Mark has always loved the 1980s switch-on-the-C64-and-start-programming thing. And then Siobhan was the last piece. I loved the fact that at Criterion she'd done *Burnout 3* and then *Burnout 4*. She'd actually shipped games. We really didn't want to do a Lionhead two. As much as I love Lionhead and Bullfrog, we didn't want to do another boutique arthouse studio that never shipped.





Ping-pong, lampshades and BAFTAs with impromptu amendments: Media Molecule's offices mirror the wide-ranging playfulness of the company's games



THE MAKING OF…
Infinity Blade

How a tale of swords helped Chair Entertainment carve a path to iOS glory

Back in January, Epic announced that the *Infinity Blade* series had surpassed $30 million (£18.6m) in sales, placing it among the most successful iOS games

Publisher Epic Games
Developer Chair Entertainment
Format iOS
Origin US
Release 2010

Brothers **Donald** and **Geremy Mustard** always knew that they wanted to work together – but they didn't initially plan on making games for a living. "It was probably when I was about 13 that we started creating a master plan," recalls Geremy. "We originally thought we were going to make movies in Hollywood. We really wanted to tell stories. When we were at college, though, *Final Fantasy VII* came out. Up until then, we'd thought games were a two-dimensional medium, and that they weren't very satisfying."

Both impoverished students at the time, the Mustards rented a PlayStation and a copy of Square's RPG, but they couldn't afford a memory card. "We thought, 'OK, we've got this for the next three days, we're just going to skip school and play the game straight through.' We took turns going to sleep, we played in shifts, and we were just enthralled. We realised you could tell complex stories in videogames, and with this visual style that was well beyond anything we'd seen before." Geremy laughs: "That was our inspiration to shift gears."

Alongside a change in ambitions, the marathon *FF* session also provided an initiation into the world of crunch – an experience that would come in handy over a decade later. Fast forward 13 years, and the duo had founded Chair Entertainment. The studio's second game, XBLA-based Metroidvania title *Shadow Complex*, earned it a reputation as a smart outfit with a knack for making old ideas seem fresh, and it also landed it a parent company in the shape of Epic Games.

Then in July 2010, Epic approached Chair with a proposal. Epic's tech team had managed to get the Unreal Engine running on the iPhone, and needed a killer game to show it off. There was a catch, however: the game had to be finished by the end of the year, and it had to be playable on stage at the Apple keynote in just eight weeks' time.

It was like *Final Fantasy VII* without the memory card all over again. "What a crazy time," recalls Donald, who now serves as Chair's creative director. "It was a week or two before my wife gave birth, and I just sat there and listened to the idea. 'Wait, so in two months I have to have something that runs and you can show on stage, and then three months after that we have to ship it? And I'm about to have a baby? Fun.'"

Donald pauses. "That was on a Friday, and by Monday morning we knew we wanted to make *Infinity Blade*."

Working with small teams and tight budgets has made Chair uncommonly decisive. It's also ensured that the studio has a backlog of ideas to be drawn upon whenever necessary. "After we finished *Shadow Complex*, we spent time brainstorming Kinect or Wii games, and we basically designed in our heads a game that was very like *Infinity Blade*," explains Donald. "When we saw iOS, we knew it would be perfect. Better, even, than with motion controls. On that Monday, we had three hours of pre-production, and then we just went for it. It's crazy looking back to see how many decisions we made in the first three hours that turned out to be really lucky guesses. The short production definitely forced us to scope the game appropriately. Had it not been for that, I may have fallen into the temptation of trying to make a more traditional game."

Infinity Blade, it turned out, was not going to be traditional at all. It was to be an on-rails RPG, for starters, and it would see the player tapping hotspots to move around a gigantic castle as they levelled up and acquired gear. At the very heart of the adventure, there would be a series of swipe-based swordfights, which the team hoped would deliver the drama and elegance so often lacking when other games bust out the rapiers.

"In my head, a real fight would be about nuance: defending, reading your opponent… I wanted to parry"

"My frustration as a gamer was that there were no sword games where the fighting was how I imagined it might be," says Donald. "The closest I could come was *Prince Of Persia*, where you actually had to defend a bit, or *Ocarina Of Time*, where you fight yourself. I'm no swordfighter but, in my head, a real fight would be about nuance: defending, reading your opponent and hitting these offensive windows. I wanted to parry. Games have blocking, but they tend not to take into account the angle of the sword that's coming at you and then knocking it out of the way. We knew if we could have a game that made parrying fun, we'd have a pretty cool game."

For the first week of development, the team talked themselves through the evolving design. "Since *Shadow Complex*, we'd been learning how to refine features when they were pretty much still at the paper stage, before you've even started coding anything," says Geremy, Chair's technical director. "It's this funny, Zen-like process of envisioning the entire thing in your head and trying to work out if it's fun. 'OK, if I press this button or swipe across the screen now, does that feel fun in my head?' Those first few days, we designed out this full game. Then we were like, 'OK, that's going to take too long,' so we cut two-thirds of it in the very first days of the project. That never happens! Most games are much more organically made: 'Yeah, we'll have a few months to just discover if this is even any fun to play.'"

Complicating matters, of course, was the fact that Epic was still building its engine for iOS. "It was scary when we started, because the tech was very much in development," admits Geremy. "We were at the forefront of what was going on. Each day it seemed like there were new things that were breaking. So many of the touch features we were trying to add in – the engine just really wasn't designed with touch interfaces in mind. Even for something like a swipe, we had to determine whether somebody was swiping a finger across the screen, and then work out how to make that fun and responsive. We couldn't use Apple's standard libraries, of course, because they aren't actually responsive enough to run at 30fps. We had to have our own techniques for that too. Take into account the limited memory, and there were days when it just looked impossible. Just making this game work felt like a series of miracles."

If the technology brought headaches, it also provided an unusual opportunity for the team: a chance to make a game with a new kind of rhythm, one that was built around a mobile gamer's peculiar attention span. "It's not just about making a touchscreen game, it's about looking at how you actually play on these devices," argues Donald. "Playing stuff like *Fieldrunners*, I realised that the average session was about two or three minutes. We had to completely restructure the way we looked at pacing. Traditionally, you know the player's sitting on a couch and you have them locked in for at least half an hour. With iOS you don't have that at all. A lot of console developers, early on with iOS, were trying to shoehorn in a console experience. We were more like, 'Let's bring in the production values and design sensibilities, but then reshape them for this new, amazing device.'

"The opportunity is that you have a game that works its way into people's lives," he continues, "a game that's with you all the time. Instead of having a planned experience, it can be rolled more into the everyday things that happen. Short-



session gaming keeps you honest as a designer, too, because something awesome has to happen regularly. It means that gameplay has to remain more pure. A lot of console games can get away with not having core loops that are that good, because there are so many other things they can do. A game that only has your attention for 30 seconds has to be very polished and very tight, and it needs a mechanic that's easy to learn but difficult to master."

Driven by such thinking, *Infinity Blade* started to take shape as a game that moved outwards in a series of concentric circles, with a structure that sees you grinding through the same environment again and again, exploring the castle and being repeatedly killed by the final boss until you're eventually powerful enough to give him a decent fight. "If you look at *Infinity Blade*, that's why we came up with the bloodline concept," says Donald. "You can play the game for a minute or so, and that's one fight. Or you can play a 30-minute bloodline, get to the God King at the end, and it's still not too much of a commitment. Or you can commit to a couple of bloodlines."

With the design coming together and the keynote looming, Chair should have been working on a slice of it to use as a demo. It wasn't, though: it was building a rough version of the entire game. "We're committed to full playable prototypes," laughs Donald. "We believe very much that the sooner you can play through the game from start to finish, the better the final game will be. It's like figure drawing. A figure drawing class is like three hours, but they always tell you that you have to nail the gesture early on. If you don't nail that gesture in 30 seconds, the drawing's going to be bad three hours later. We always try to nail that gesture early on – we get the whole shape of the game really fast and then try to polish it.

"So *Shadow Complex*, for example, was an 18-month development, but you could finish the game at five months," he continues. "It was really ugly, and you were controlling a cylinder, but the jump heights were in, and from there you can refine the experience. For *Infinity Blade*, that core fighting mechanic – dodge, block, parry – we had in two weeks; you could have a fun sword battle within that time. It was all we worked on at first. Then we made the whole game playable. The keynote deadline put our beliefs in this to the test, but we stuck to our guns. We knew having that prototype would inform so many decisions, and although we had the stage thing looming, we still had to ship a game a few months later."

Finally, with a complete playable game built of boxes and cubes, and with *Shadow Complex* characters standing in for enemies, the team finally carved out a vertical slice and got ready for Apple. The build-up had been hectic, but the keynote itself was something of a blur. "It's just a lot of practice, really. It's just indicative," says Donald while recalling the experience. "To me, Steve Jobs was a perfectionist. Everything he did, that mentality percolates through the entire organisation, even when it comes to a stage presentation. It was weeks – weeks! – of rehearsal, making sure everything's organised and well-run. It's quite a process Apple puts you through to put you up on stage, and [to] choose who their stage partners will be. It's a really big deal for them too, see, because this is how they create their brand and that mystique they have about them."

The 2010 Apple keynote proved to be a significant event for the entire gaming industry. Not only was Apple finally starting to take games seriously, it was leading the way with something unashamedly hardcore. Glinting armour, muscular beasts and steel sparking against steel: *Infinity Blade* made a startling impression, and the enthusiastic chatter carried the team through the final months of development.

That on-stage presentation all but guaranteed financial success, but the extent of the game's popularity still took Chair by surprise. *Infinity Blade* went on to be the fastest-grossing app yet seen on iTunes, earning well over $1 million in its first few days of release, and spawning a sequel; a tie-in novel; and an offshoot, *Infinity Blade: Dungeons*, that's being developed by Impossible Studios, an outfit made up of ex-Big Huge Games staff.

More importantly, the design opportunities offered by working on iOS have left a real impact on both the Mustards and their studio. "It's amazing how iOS development allows you to experiment," says Donald. "The day after we shipped *Infinity Blade*, we came back in and made more *Infinity Blade*. And we had the radical idea to give it away for free. We loved that! People loved that! It was great to have a game evolving based on the community's feedback: their tweets, their emails and also our own metrics. That allowed us to shape *Infinity Blade 1*, and make a much more focused sequel."

"The lessons we learned both from the quick process and by making good decisions up front and carrying them through have stayed with us, too," says Geremy. "It makes decision making on new projects a lot easier. It's amazing to be quick and nimble and agile, and that allows you to innovate a little more. The things we did on *Infinity Blade* are spreading throughout the rest of Epic now as well, so that's exciting. By limiting us at an early stage, we got to rethink a lot of the things we do, relearn some really old lessons, and apply those to current-gen games."

Ultimately, though, the success of iOS gaming reaches far beyond Chair itself. "If you look at the way that we, as a culture, are talking about games, you'd be surprised how much that has changed in four years," says Donald. "The idea that there could be quality gaming for less than $60? Even on XBLA, the idea of something like *Shadow Complex* was really out there. iOS [games had] a huge part in breaking conventions of structure and pricing, but they also reintroduced that focus on pure mechanics, too. That was something console games didn't have to rely on as much – and because of iOS games, they're going to have to learn to rely on it a lot more." ■



Donald Mustard
Co-founder and creative director, Chair Entertainment

How did you settle on a visual style for the strong, detailed art?
The background was something we'd been talking about for years. We wanted to create a fantasy franchise that had a distinct approach: rooted in reality, while still being fantastical. To me, a lot of fantasy is even worse than bad science fiction: 'Oh, magic did it!' You have weird armour and monsters, and it's not related to anything. We tried to answer how things got there. When you see a troll, we've tried to work out how it formed, where it got its armour, and who made it. We ground all this stuff in reality, and then give it a bit of a flourish.

Did your understanding of the world make it easier to then expand on things?
Yes. We took the time early on to write a very comprehensive bible of the universe and the rules of this world. Because that's all set in place, when we do write a book or make other games, we're working from that same internal logic. I don't know how many iOS gamers care about this, but we care a lot.

What are your hopes for the future?
My hope is that ten years from now, if there are still *Infinity Blade* products, people will be able to look back to the first game and see clues that enlighten things that have come in later. Even though that game was made in five months.







The visuals enabled by Epic's Unreal Engine caught the eye of Apple, who eagerly made the game a showpiece. As such, the *Infinity Blade* series has been shown on stage at various Apple hardware reveals





The bloodline begins

Infinity Blade may have been Epic's first iOS game, but it wasn't the company's first App Store release. That honour goes to Epic Citadel, a surprisingly entertaining tech demo that brilliantly captured the lavish medieval visual style Chair would then expand upon with its action-RPG.

While Epic Citadel may not have loot, enemies or objectives, it does allow for a degree of exploration that *Infinity Blade* can't even try to match. Switching between two distinct control methods, you can move around the app's cobbled streets and echoing courtyards as you wish, investigating every nook and cranny, and marvelling at the dramatic skybox that hangs overhead. It's both an advertising pitch for Epic, then, and a kind of companion piece for Chair's more elaborate game. Even today, there's something thrilling about seeing such detailed environments moving past on the screen of your phone.





Infinity Blade was originally conceived in early 2009 as a Kinect game, before shifting platform to iOS





THE ART OF…

Rage

Understanding a landmark, and maybe also a crossroads, in videogame art



This article's images appear courtesy of game art site Dead End Thrills (www.deadendthrills.com)

An alternative to tiled and repetitive texturing, id's MegaTexture technology enables it to stream a single giant texture into memory across static terrain. As a result, artists can finesse a game world down to the last pixel, the catch being the storage that's required





Q&A



Stephan Martiniere
Art director, *Rage*

The decision to make *Rage* look identical on all platforms meant that technology designed to empower the artist ended up crushing their work at the behest of aging console hardware. So goes the narrative that's made it one of the most underrated and enigmatic games of a generation. We speak to art director **Stephan Martiniere** to get his perspective.

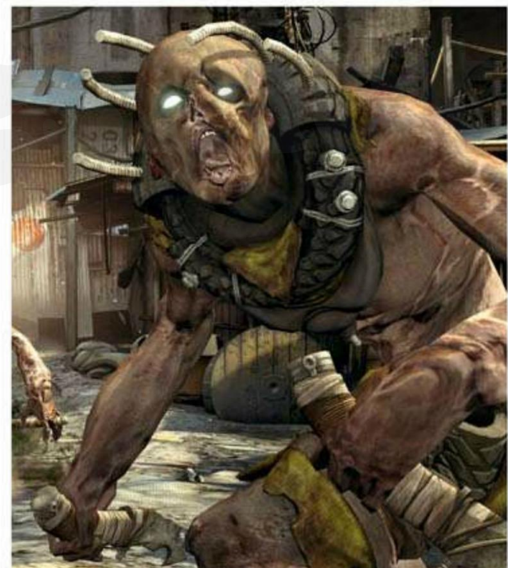
How was *Rage* presented to you?
John Carmack is very visual, and he wanted it to be amazing. The big idea was they wanted to do an open world during the day… The tech was already working multiplatform when I got there, which was a strong requirement from John. He didn't want to push the technology further until he was sure it would be working on PS3 and 360, and that the quality was on par on every platform. So there was already tech in place that was extremely strong, and as an art director that was like a dream come true. When they showed me what MegaTexture could do, and how it could create these unique sets, it was beautiful.

It's a very character-led piece of design.
When I start thinking about big ideas like these, environments with people, everything has to make sense visually. Someone has to look at a character and recognise right away that they're from a particular world, which helps navigation and gameplay. Take the bandits: to me, it became extremely important that each group be recognisable right away. So we had to find costumes and a colour language that would be very direct… I had to think very quickly about personality, and that opened up a whole new area of conceiving environments. That, to me, was the most interesting thing to explore artistically.

I've worked the same way on a lot of projects. In *Stranglehold*, there were a lot of bandits – these clans in both Hong Kong and Chicago. You go with the

Though static, *Rage*'s lighting is a breath of fresh air next to the perpetual twilight of modern console games, and it's also economic for processors. Few games enjoy a broader spectrum





brushstrokes first – understand what each of these groups represents to the story, then dig closer and closer on each group. Once you have the foundation in place, you can only enhance the idea.

The Authority is an excellent presence in the game, mutating the environment while conserving its anonymity.
There was a lot of thinking [behind] that. It was very difficult at the beginning, because I had to be everywhere, because there was so much to create aside from that faction… When I finally sat down, I was tackling everything at the same time: architecture, weaponry, props, and characters. I started exploring some shapes that were very different… that I knew were going to be relevant designs that could be everywhere. Since so much of the world had been established in terms of palette and personality, I saw at that point exactly what these guys should be: the exact opposite of everything else.

Were you shocked by the extremity of optimisation, or dips in texture quality?
You have to be very honest about it, just being in an environment where you rely on technologies that really will take [getting] all the way to the finish line to show you the end result, the last six months are when everything unravels. To be perfectly honest, I'm still so much happier [with *Rage*] than with anything else I've worked on. The game shines big time. It would have been a different story if they'd done the compression and suddenly *everything* looked like shit. I've worked on games where I've seen that happen, and you're crying because there's nothing you can do – you're dependent on a platform and technology that won't give you what you want. ■



What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

The danger of the no-brainer

Many investors (meaning everyone from venture capitalists to publishing executives) have no understanding of games or why people play them. It's not their fault; they just don't have much regular contact with the process or the punters, and their perspective tends to be very abstract as a result. So proposals for bold new games often sound like leaps in the dark, and that frightens them.

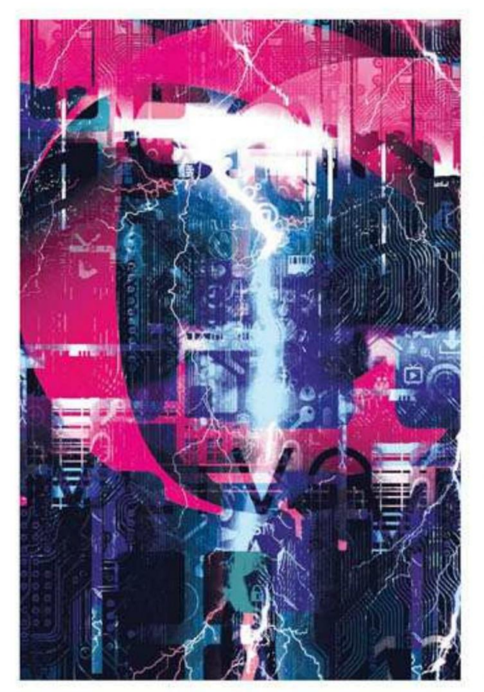
'Online poker meets 3D' or 'social games meet Twitter' or 'handheld games meet mobile phones' are things that most people can visualise. But 'science fiction firstperson shooter' means very little to the people who don't play FPSes, even if they do control the budgets that fund such projects. Those people prefer no-brainers.

No-brainers are ideas that need no explanation beyond 'X meets Y,' and the game industry is full of them. They make perfect sense on a spreadsheet, and their business rationale is considered obvious yet genius by the uninformed. They often come packaged in an inspirational marketing story, a vision that's compelling to users or investors. No-brainers often seem like exactly what the game industry should be aiming toward.

Here's another view: 'no-brainer' is another way of saying 'dumb'. Not thought through. Just plain stupid. The real problem is that no-brainers are based on dumb assumptions. They assume that players are everywhere on every platform, and are unaware of other games or platforms. They assume that players understand jargon-ish concepts easily. They assume that players have infinite pockets. Finally, they assume that technology is capable of anything.

Inevitably, one or more of those assumptions proves false – either the audience doesn't exist, the proposition is arcane, the price is too high or the technology's unsound. As in cloud gaming.

Cloud gaming is a massive no-brainer. The idea is to create the Netflix of videogames, using streaming technology to send and receive game content on the fly, meaning that users don't even have to own a console to play. It joins X (cloud) with Y (games) in a subscription model, which gets many people excitedly predicting disruption in the game industry and the death of consoles. It sounds great, but it's incredibly dumb.



No-brainers are ideas that need no explanation beyond 'X meets Y,' and the game industry is full of them

While the audience for hardcore games is real, and likes bargains (see: second-hand games and Steam sales), all-you-can-eat bundles often prove trickier to sell. Gamers may like bargains, but they like new releases of top quality even more, so a buffet service would need to be able to match those releases. That's a tough, though solvable, business problem. But it also hinges on the cloud gaming experience being as good as consoles, and it just isn't.

A videogame has to be responsive. Whether playing *Spec Ops: The Line* or *Peggle*, the player needs to feel that their button presses translate to onscreen actions immediately. The experience needs to be tangible and disintermediated to draw them in, and the enemy of that is lag.

Imagine that your gamepad, console and TV form a loop. You push a button, your gamepad sends a signal to your console, which then interprets this as a shoot action, calculates the results as video output, and you see a target's head blown off his shoulders. This loop may seem instantaneous, but it can take tens of milliseconds to execute.

Now imagine that the distance from your gamepad to your console is 50 miles, and from your console to your TV is 50 miles. As before, you push a button, the signal goes to the console, and is processed and returned. The difference is the signal has to be compressed, transmitted 100 miles, decompressed, and then displayed.

Even in a vacuum, a photon travels 100 miles in about half a millisecond. An electromagnetic wave is a little slower, but when you introduce copper wire, packet switching, and all the other doohickeys that make the Internet work, it's not unreasonable to expect lag to be at least 30ms in either direction for any digital signal.

Online games solve latency problems by keeping processing local and using error correction, but cloud gaming cannot do that, because all the processing happens off-site. While cloud gaming providers realised that they would have issues in this area, and started building large networks of servers and great compression tech to reduce the transmission distance for players, the physical distances still cause issues and the central experience seems less than immediate. For all the business model advantages and talk of disruption, cloud gaming just sort of sucks.

Gaikai was recently sold to Sony, probably to get access to the parts of its technology that work. Meanwhile, a (hotly disputed) rumour has it that OnLive may never have had more than 1,600 concurrent users, and the company is scrambling to shed its debts through selling itself. These are not signs that augur well for the future. So ends yet another ignominious no-brainer.

Games are an entertainment industry, and players expect to be delighted. They don't care about strategies, availability or buffets. When they have fun, they become intensely loyal. But to get there? That takes 'brainers'.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com

In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

In defence of documentation

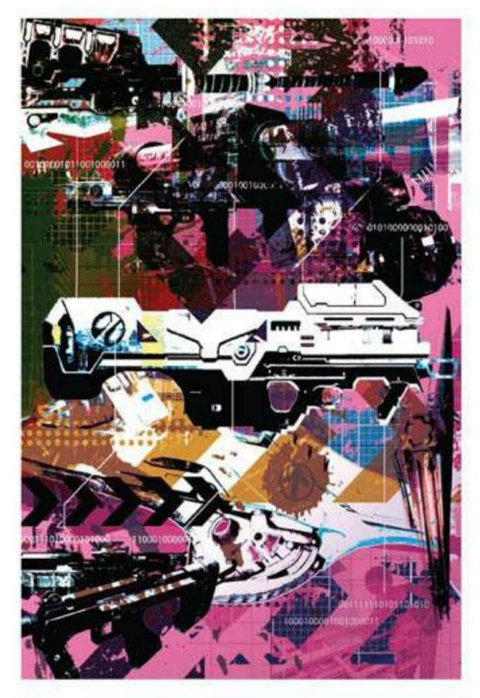
Over the years, I have had many discussions about the value of design documentation. Some developers dismiss it as designer busywork, while others give lectures about it. Some developers are openly dismissive of design documentation – refusing to even read it, and claiming it is detached from reality. Some projects produce hundreds of pages, while others produce hundreds of pages of trash. A great deal of design documentation is nothing more than really bad fiction writing, and much of the rest is little more than really cumbersome code.

I have worked very hard to find effective ways to reduce the amount of design documentation produced during the course of my projects, as well as to amplify its utility. I consider it a point of pride to have reduced the amount of design documentation produced by my projects to about one-tenth of what was put out when I first started working as a designer. But despite this attempt to escape design documents, I find them difficult to abandon completely.

I believe design documentation can be valuable in four different ways. First, it can function as a road map to development. A detailed feature specification makes it clear what needs to be developed by whom, and what the dependencies are. This in turn allows you to begin planning the development over time. Of course, no paper design ever survives the first few weeks of real development, but at least the documentation can help you determine how best to correct course, or which new heading to take should you choose to change direction.

The second use is as a guide for functional testing. Ideally, a test team will be involved from the beginning, and the functional test plan will be a part of the process. This enables the test team to know exactly how a given feature is supposed to function in the game at any given time, and thus minimises false bug reporting. Admittedly, there are significant questions relating to maintaining test team efficiency as documentation becomes incorrect or out-of-date, but it can only help if test is involved in the process from the beginning.

Along the same lines, the third thing design documentation facilitates is communication – in particular when working in large teams. A given feature may be developed by dozens of people in different disciplines, and in complex projects a feature may lie dormant for months between the time a programmer lays the foundation and an artist or animator plugs in final content. Expecting every single person to be aware of the current state and the end aesthetic goal of every feature is difficult even with small teams. Documentation enables people to get up to date quickly, and know who to talk to when they have to dust off a partially implemented feature and push it forward.



A great deal of design documentation is nothing more than really bad fiction writing and cumbersome code

Finally, and most importantly, design documents can serve as a kind of fast prototype. When a designer is forced to specify the detailed procedures for reloading, ammo management and weapon switching in an FPS, for example, ugly problems can be avoided before they have been coded and built upon. When the player enters a vehicle while in the middle of a forced weapon switch caused by an OutOfAmmo event, but then acquires ammo while in the vehicle, what weapon equips when he exits, and is it loaded? If these questions are answered on paper before they are implemented, you can choose the answer. If they're implemented first, then the solution to these subtle problems (which tend to cause bugs) will be 'whatever is easiest and safest' as opposed to 'whatever is right'.

I believe, though, that under ideal circumstances the very best developers can do away with design documentation entirely. If you are aiming for lighter, more agile teams, I believe there are three criteria that need to be met in order for developers to safely abandon design documentation.

First, I believe the team needs to be working in a code base that all its members are all familiar with, and have all shipped games with. If the team knows the engine, the tools and the pipelines, and has an intuitive understanding of how a given feature will work when 'going with the grain' of the code base, then the primary advantage of design documentation acting as a fast prototype is undercut by the existing collective wisdom of the team.

Second, the team needs to be small enough and communicative enough that it can collectively whiteboard up a feature, and through verbal discussion bring up a shared mental emulation of the running game. This often happens during discussions among members of a team when a game is post-alpha, but in order to abandon design documentation, it needs to be able to happen consistently before the game is even in full production, which is very rare.

Finally, the team needs to have a proven track record of shipping hit videogames together. This might perhaps seem like an arbitrary caveat, but what is the point of being able to abandon design documentation if it doesn't ultimately improve the end product?

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The Possibility Space



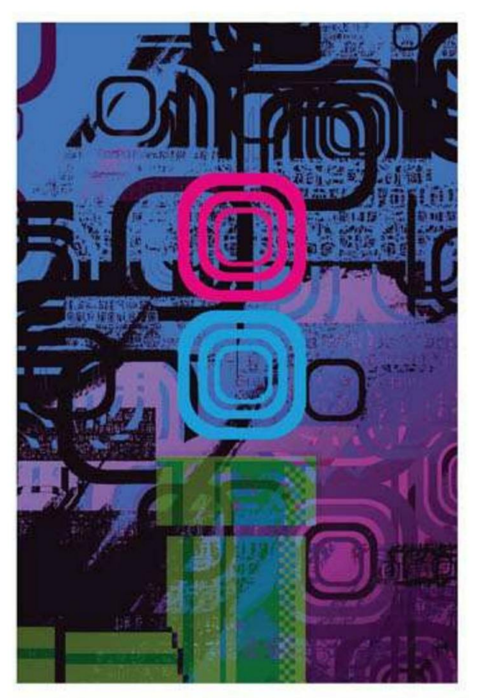
RANDY SMITH

The creation of universal truth

My favourite topics are those I don't fully understand yet, ones that are perhaps even more philosophy than media theory, and may have no definitive explanation. Something I've been observing for years without resolution is the separation between game systems and what I'm going to call 'tokens'. Systems are the rules and mechanics, whereas everything tangible and literal is the tokens. In production terms, we'd call this systems vs content, but that distinction deals with the craft of making games, whereas this pertains to what role these play in an overall artistic work. The purpose of tokens is to bind the invisible systems to a visible interpretation – to make systems, which are abstract, be 'about' something. An example token is the graphic depicting an Italian plumber, which serves to tell us what this object in the game system is intended to be, and creates a metaphor explaining its behaviour. He's a little man that we make run and jump, spawning more implications than if the graphic was just a colourful dot. But even a dot would be a token explaining the relevance of some variables perpetually changing in the system – they can be mapped on to an object in motion, understood as physics.

Creating tokens seems to be an organic, familiar practice, similar to painting horses on cave walls: it's the world reflected through a human mind. Systems, on the other hand, touch upon the godly and unknowable. Systems are universes unto themselves, and when we design games we create universes. Not those you travel in *Eve Online* or *Skyrim*; those are complicated configurations of dozens of game systems and mountains of tokens. The universes I'm talking about are primitive and clean; they're symbolic realities fabricated by the very existence of game mechanics. Tic-tac-toe consists of rules, two players, a board and pieces. This produces a finite universe of states, boundaries and patterns about what can exist and how things change.

The universes created by systems are valuable because they are inherently true. The supposition that they could be false is as equally metaphysical and impractical as debating whether the real universe is 'lying'. The truth that each systemic universe expresses is: these rules lead to these



The act of exploring and observing a game system teaches truth and bestows abstract wisdom

behaviours. Gravity is a foundational rule of the real universe, and everything we experience in real life is created or touched by that rule. Tic-tac-toe, a game built on a tiny system, still manages to express truths about vulnerability, standoffs and unwinnable situations, and that's just when you play to win. Game systems of modest complexity, such as *Tetris*, chess and Scrabble can offer a lifetime of new observations.

Even if a systemic truth is very oblique and comes up rarely, it's still a truth. But often these rules are useful if you're open to recognising, processing and applying them. Consider certain scientific laws, such as conservation of mass and energy. You might not use the formulae directly in your daily life, but when you truly understand the principle, you see it reflected everywhere – even areas that you might not expect, such as social interactions. And when it comes to truly understanding a principle, there is no better way than to interact with it, exploring the results of combinations of input over time.

If systems create inarguable truths that spring into existence, then tokens are more like copy-and-pasted snippets of reality, shortcuts to truth contaminated by human interpretation. In some ways, tokens are more directly useful, because they require less examination. They are like someone providing just the answer to the question you asked. Systems are like someone giving you the information used to derive that answer.

I believe this is the real educational value of games. In the absence of informative messages (or even despite negative ones) that arise from tokens, the act of exploring and observing a game system teaches truth and bestows abstract wisdom. This is something most adults who don't play games will never understand about them, and that most gamers understand but have a hard time expressing. I love playing *Super Crate Box*, not because I fantasise about using different weapons on enemies, but because I learn more about risk, greed and managing circumstances each time I play. Experimenting with the system educates me in a way that no text ever could.

There are two types of games: experiential games, such as *Skyrim*, with big systems and tons of tokens; and puzzle-like games, such as *Drop 7*, with small systems and a few abstract tokens. I'm a fan of both, but have tended to write about story and character, which are aspects of the former only. Experiential games are valuable in the same way novels and films are, but huge sets of features and complex interactions produce systems far too large to absorb in a lifetime, and too clouded with tokens for their truths to shine through. It's interesting how different these entities are from a media theory standpoint, despite being classified the same. Then again, they both convey truths – some by reflecting the world through human interpretation, others by removing the human mind to let pristine truth spring into being.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose second game, Waking Mars, *is available in the App Store now*



Word Play

JAMES LEACH

The returns of originality

You know what there's an awful lot of on the Internet? I mean, obviously, apart from *that*. It's little games that waste a few moments of your life, use up a few watts of precious, precious electrical power, and make you feel good about yourself. I love them. When I'm asked to, I even pay for them.

One of the joys of these games is their relative unimportance to my life. A big game – an immersing, twisting, story-laden game – will absorb me, worry me, delight me, and obsess me, but the little ones are simply fun. They're the three-minute predigested pop song to the big title's epic rock opera in a gatefold sleeve. (I have a horrible suspicion that you might have to type 'gatefold sleeve' into Google now.)

Sure, there's room for both in the world of the gamer, but I worry that I am drifting into the arena of those who can't concentrate for very long. Not who can't, but who *don't*. I recently did some research by flicking rapidly from page to page of the web, and discovered that we're all becoming like this. Knowledge is available to us so quickly that we use it like sticking plasters to superficially cover up any gaps. Nobody delves any more. Learning has become a series of shallow facts – ideally counterintuitive ones, because we find them quirky and entertaining. At least, I think this is what's happening. I only skimmed a few pages, obviously.

And so it is with games. I worry that I'm less inclined to commit the effort to the huge epics. It's not because I haven't always got time – the amount of time I devote to smaller Internet games, iPad fripperies and mobile phone diversions is a clear indicator of that. It's just that these require no commitment emotionally. Oh, and they're also quicker to boot up, and I can play them while waiting for a train.

So when I do get around to double-clicking on an epic, years-in-the-making triple-A title, what do I expect from it? Firstly, for it to live up to its billing. I live with crushing disappointment every day of my life, but I dislike having to pay for it. Secondly, I want it to make me fall in love with it. It ought to be so good that I think about it when I'm not playing it, and try to fathom out what to do next while I'm in the bath. Thirdly, I want it to not be too difficult. My fingers are not as young as they once were.



"Sure, it's quirky and funny, and it's clearly been created to win you an award, but let's do this one by the book"

I also want it to have something that seems to thrive in the world of tiny games: originality. For a long time, it appears to have been a case of 'the bigger the game, the more sure we must be to make it a hit by writing it to appeal to absolutely everyone' syndrome. Which isn't a real syndrome, you understand, but does exist in the game developer world. This hinders originality in the sense I mean it. Originality means not being like anything else, and that means challenging people to put down their thumbs for a moment and think about something new. Do you want to risk the jobs of your 40 developers in a darkened standee-strewn office on that? Especially when there's a publisher somewhere constantly asking you, "What's it like?"

Sometimes, the poor writer takes it upon him or herself to inject some originality. 'The game is what it is,' the reasoning goes (insofar as writers do any form of reasoning ever), 'but if I make a character stand out, or try to imbue the game with new and breathtaking dialogue, perhaps it will seem more original, 60 people will get to keep their jobs, and more importantly, I'll get an award. Also, I'll know that I'm the saviour of this game, and that fleeting moment of ultimate power is all I've ever wanted, really.'

The writer, though, does not have free rein. He or she decides to submit something that pushes the boundaries, makes the player think, provides the game world with a rich new vein, and undoubtedly adds value to it for the player. And the people above him or her just shake their heads. "It just doesn't fit," they say. "It's good, but it's not what we're trying to do here. Sure, it's quirky and funny, and it's clearly been created to win you an award and make us delighted with you, but let's do this one by the book. After all, we're not making a wacky online game here! Ha ha. Now get out of my office."

To these people – who don't really exist, that'd be grotesque; and this is in no way autobiographical either – I would say, "*Portal*". But sadly, that's about all I can say to them, because while big videogames are getting better – the quality of the production, and the graphics, and, yes, the writing is without a shadow of a doubt improving, and people are getting what they deserve for their money – I'm not sure they're getting more original.

The little guys doing the apps and online titles are the ones making games where you'll find such quirky originality. And since we all have shrinking attention spans, if we're not already down to gnat-like levels, and the games are tiny, each one only contains about 50 words. So once more I'm a moaning writer, and the status quo is restored. And I say this knowing that everyone who started reading this page will have picked up their phone by now and got distrac…

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games, and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online

WE ARE EXPANDING!



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